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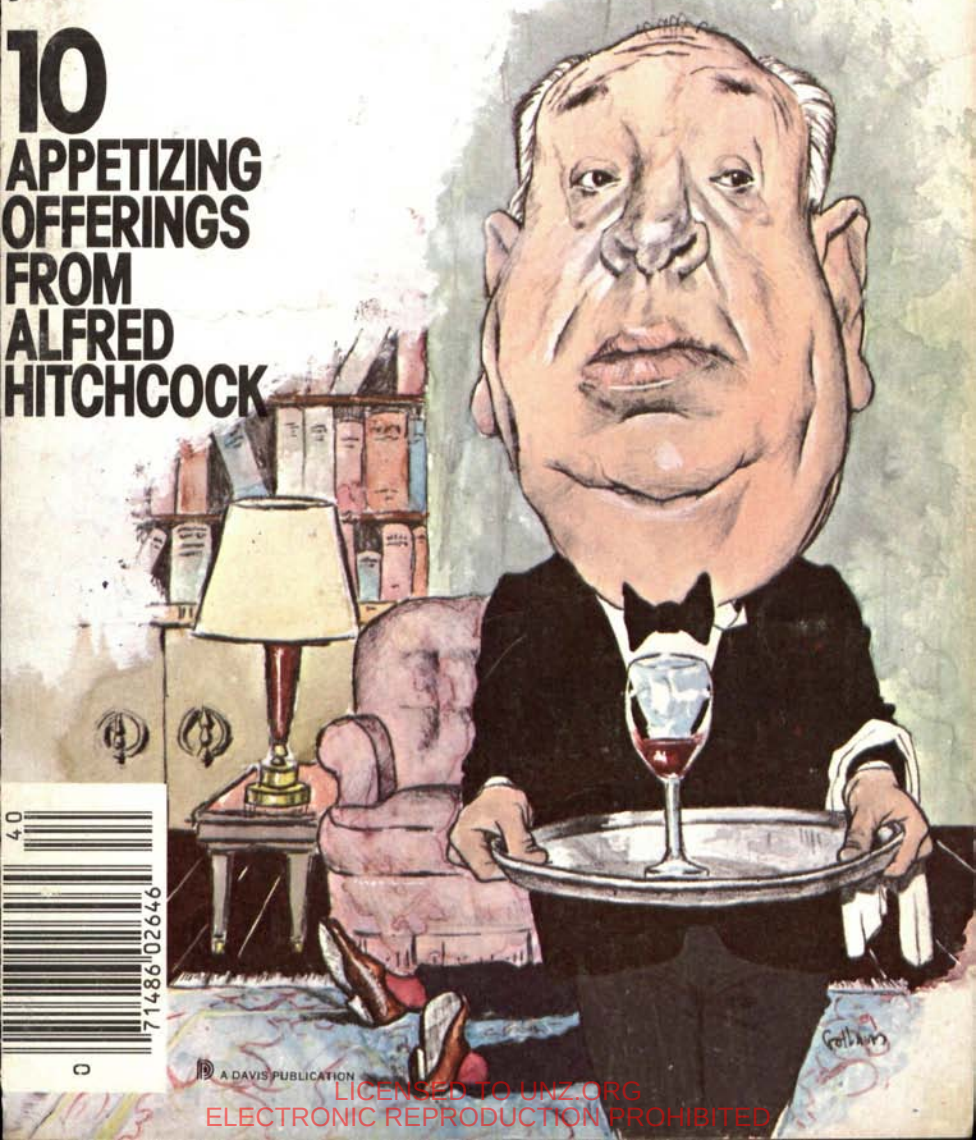

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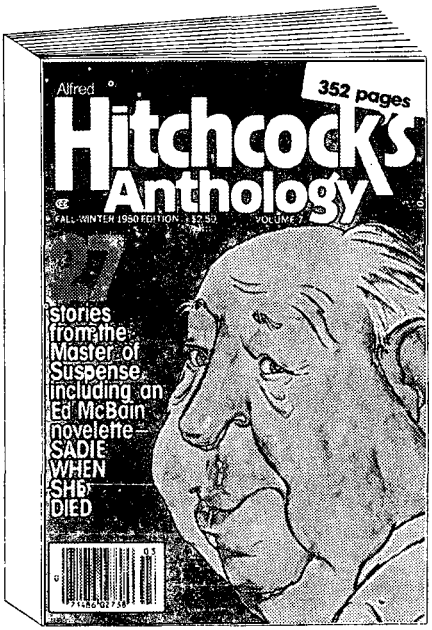

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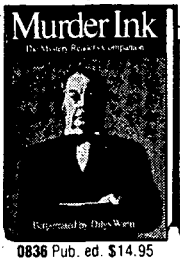

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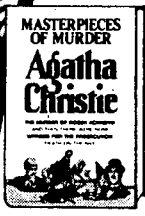

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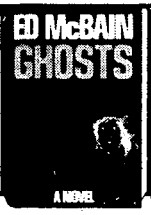

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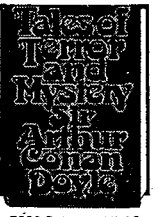

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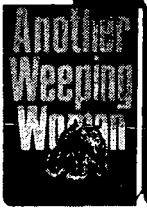

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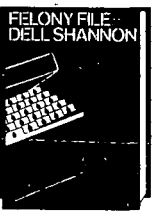

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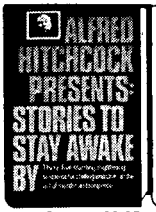

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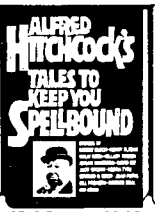

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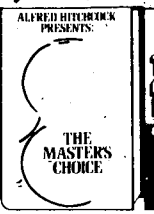

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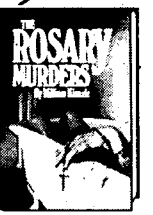

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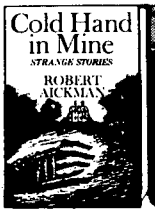

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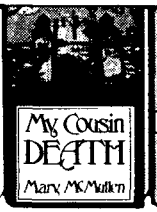

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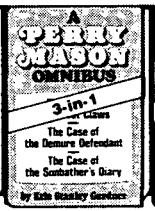

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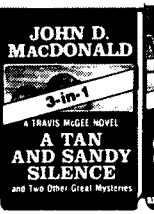

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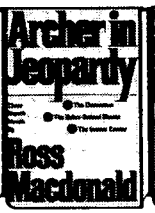

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October 1, 1980

Dear Reader:

Familiar detectives and some new ones decipher the mysteries in this month's issue. Chick Kelly puzzles out a dying message in S. S. Rafferty's "Suspects Time, Chick!" In T. M. Adams' story, a message in a bottle proves to be a lot more than a joke or a cliché. Ann F. Woodward takes us back in time to an ancient Japanese palace whose occupants communicate through finely scripted poems.

A young man's careless letter brings unexpected results in "The Solid-Gold Lie" by William Bankier, and library cop Hal Johnson finds a cryptic memo in an overdue book in James Holding's story, "The Reward." Simon Ark tracks down evil in the eeriest of settings in Edward D. Hoch's "The Vultures of Malabar."

We've had a lot of messages from our readers, and it seems that most of you would prefer the space we've given to the Letters column be used for stories. So, with this issue, we're discontinuing the column in favor of three additional pages of . . .

Good reading.

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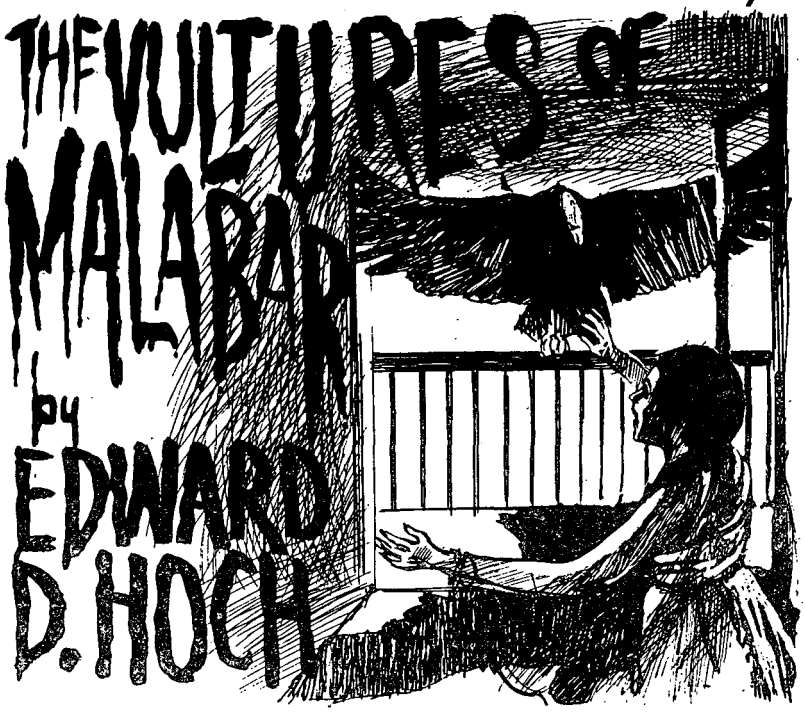
The dead were left to be devoured by vultures in the dakhmas . . .



"In Bombay they don't always bury or cremate their dead," Simon Ark said as our plane passed over the sprawling harbor city on India's west coast and came in for a perfect landing at Santa Cruz Airport. "Bodies are sometimes left to be devoured by vultures."

"You can't be serious!" I protested. Visions of corpses in the streets filled my mind. Simon had persuaded me to accompany him to Bombay with the promise that we'd be meeting some of the leaders of India's

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thriving film industry. Now it seemed more likely we'd be fighting off vultures on their way to an evening meal.

"It's quite true," Simon insisted as our plane taxied to a stop at the ramp. "The Parsis, who came here from Persia, are followers of the Zoroastrian religion. Their religious beliefs forbid both burial and cremation because they defile the sacred elements of earth, fire, and water."

"But *vultures*, Simon?"

"You'll be meeting some of the Parsi community tomorrow, my friend. You can judge for yourself."

We traveled from the airport through the crowded streets of Bombay to the Taj Mahal Intercontinental Hotel, where I'd reserved adjoining rooms for us in the modern wing. It was a great old structure dating from 1903, and somehow it made me think of the years of British rule in India—the benevolent Raj which had faded away with the twilight of empire. I left Simon at the door to his room and wondered once again what I was doing there.

Come to Bombay and meet the movie people, Simon had said, and it had sounded fine at the time. Neptune Books was looking for someone to write an authoritative volume on the Indian film industry for a series of cinema books I was editing. It was an opportunity to do some work while spending a week with Simon. I saw him all too rarely these days, especially since my wife Shelly had taken an active dislike to him.

"The man is an anachronism," she'd insisted one night over dinner. "He claims to be two thousand years old, but he doesn't have to act so much like he's living in the past! This is the twentieth century—almost the twenty-first! We care about inflation and energy and nuclear war, not about confronting the devil or seeking out ghosts or finding a unicorn! If the devil is still around, he probably wears a suit and tie and holds down a nine-to-five job in New York."

"Not in publishing, I hope." I'd learned to take Shelly's occasional outbursts calmly, especially on the subject of Simon Ark.

But in spite of Shelly's outbursts, or partly because of them, here I was in Bombay with Simon, gazing out the hotel window at a world I'd never seen before. A hot dry April breeze blew in off the sea. I knew what had brought me to Bombay, but I still didn't know what had brought Simon Ark here.

After a good night's rest to recover from jet lag, Simon and I boarded

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a black-and-yellow taxi at the stand outside the hotel. "What are those men doing?" I asked the driver as we pulled away from the curb, pointing to a pair of brightly turbaned natives who seemed to be peering into the ears of passers-by.

The driver, who spoke the careful English of India under the British Empire, explained. "They are kan-saf wallas—professional ear-cleaners. For about six cents in your money they will gently remove wax from the ear, using a small silver spoon, warm mustard oil, and wisps of cotton."

"I guess I've seen everything now," I said.

But Simon was more interested in our destination than in the ear-cleaners. "We'll be meeting with members of the Sanjan family. They are very active in the Bombay film industry, and I believe they'll be of great help to you."

"And to you, Simon? You didn't fly halfway around the world for your health. What is it here you seek?"

"I always seek the same thing, my friend, though it comes in different guises."

"The devil? Evil?"

"Perhaps only human greed. One never knows."

I'd expected the taxi to take us to one of the film studios or perhaps to the Pali Hill region, where many of the top stars had luxurious homes, but the cab circled Back Bay along the main promenade of Marine Drive and approached the wealthy area of high-rise apartments that was Malabar Hill. When I questioned Simon he merely smiled and said, "No movie stars today. That will come later. The Sanjan family are the backers, the moneyed people. They live here."

We took the elevator to the tenth floor. "Welcome, welcome," an elderly man said, opening an apartment door and beckoning us inside.

Simon introduced me and told him of my interest in a book about the Indian film industry. "This is Dilip Sanjan. He knows more about films than any other man in Bombay."

Sanjan was short and vigorous, though I guessed his age to be well into the seventies. He looked toward the living room and a woman came forward. "My wife, Reba," he said. She seemed no more than forty, and her beauty was striking. I was not at all surprised when he added, "Reba was a star in several pictures before we married."

While Reba brought us refreshments Sanjan and Simon settled down to talk. "Simon and I knew each other fifty years ago," the Indian told

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me. "When this present trouble arose, he was the only person I could turn to. He is an expert on Satanic rites."

I grinned at Simon and asked, "Did he look the same fifty years ago, Mr. Sanjan?"

"The same, yes. A bit older, if anything. What is the secret of your longevity, Simon?"

"Vitamins," Simon replied with a smile. "But let us get to the matter at hand. You have an unusual problem, Dilip." As he spoke, Simon's eyes followed Reba while she moved to open a sliding glass door onto the balcony.

"As I told you on the telephone, my old friend, it concerns the *dakhmas*."

"Explain them to my friend here."

Sanjan turned to me. "We are Parsis, followers of Zoroaster the prophet. Clustered at the top of Malabar Hill are seven circular enclosures, walled but roofless, where our dead are left to be devoured by vultures. These are called *dakhmas*, or towers of silence. There is a double door in the wall of each tower through which a team of four professional pallbearers, clad all in white, carries the body of the deceased. The towers are kept locked and no one else may enter them. The body is laid out naked on a circular stone platform about thirty yards in diameter. The platform slopes gently toward a central pit, and at a later date the pallbearers return to push any remaining bones into the pit."

"Simon told me about the custom," I admitted, repressing a shudder. It was their religion, after all. "Are there still many vultures in Bombay?"

"Enough. We have our reform element, of course, who claim the vulture population is declining and the dead should be cremated. But I can tell you, when a fresh corpse is carried into the *dakhmas* there are usually several dozen of the birds in attendance."

"You speak from personal experience?"

Simon Ark interrupted. "Dilip is a hereditary pallbearer."

The old man bowed slightly in acknowledgment. "As were my father and grandfather before me." He turned his attention to Simon. "The custom has not changed since we talked of it some fifty years ago, Simon. But now something new and troublesome has occurred. Someone is entering the towers for an unauthorized purpose."

"You told me that much on the telephone," Simon said. "But how is this possible? Have the door locks been tampered with?"

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"No, they have not. But remember that the seven walled enclosures are open to the sky, and hidden by dense vegetation which grows quite close to the walls. The walls are over twenty feet high, but a person could reach the top by climbing a nearby tree, then lower himself inside on a rope. A rope was found hanging from one of the branches."

"What about the vultures?" I asked.

"They do not bother the living."

Simon leaned forward. "How do you know of this intruder?"

"One of the pallbearers, Vija Rau, went to a *dakhma* a few days ago to push bones into the central pit. He surprised a man inside—a man bent over studying the bones as if he were looking for something significant. He leaped upon Vija, stabbed him in the side, and escaped through the open door."

"Is Vija alive?"

"Yes. He is recovering in hospital."

"I will want to speak with him," Simon said. "What other evidence is there of—".

He was interrupted by a sudden gasp from Reba. She dashed across the room to the balcony, and I caught just a glimpse of a great black-winged bird poised on the railing, then it was gone. Reba let out a shriek. We ran to her side and followed her horrified gaze to the floor of the balcony.

What was lying there I didn't recognize at first. And then I realized that the great black vulture, startled by Reba, had dropped the thing from its beak as it flew away.

It was a human finger.

At the hospital Simon and I waited to see the wounded Vija Rau. I had still not fully recovered from the incident on the Sanjans' balcony, but Simon was inclined to take it in stride. "After all, the vultures are only behaving in their natural manner. No human or animal can ever be criticized for that. The Parsis place the bodies on the *dakhmas* to be devoured, and the vultures do their job. If one occasionally leaves the dinner table with a piece of its meal, who are we to criticize? Dilip tells me this sort of thing has happened before, and I'm sure it will happen again."

"I hope I'm gone from here when it does."

We were admitted to Rau's hospital room.

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The Indian was a young man with a ready smile. He sat up in bed to greet us, though his left side still seemed to pain him a bit. "Dilip Sanjan told me you would come," he said, extending a hand. "I will be out of here in a few days. It was a foolish thing."

"A knife wound is never foolish," Simon told him. "The man might have killed you."

"I was so startled to find him in the *dakhma* that I inadvertently blocked his exit. I don't think he meant to harm me—only to escape."

"The doctor says the wound could have been fatal," Simon persisted. "Did you recognize the man?"

"Not by name, but he looked familiar. It was so unreal—as if I were seeing a film."

"Had you ever encountered an intruder there before?"

"Certainly not! The *dakhmas* are sacred places!"

"And there was nothing of value on the bodies?"

The wounded man shook his head. "They are laid out naked for the vultures. No clothing, no jewelry. In the case of Indu, I personally prepared his body, removing his ring and emptying his pockets after the body was delivered to us. He had a few trinkets—a little silver spoon, some gold coins—nothing more."

"And nothing remains in the *dakhmas* but bones?"

"Nothing."

"Who was this Indu person?" Simon asked.

"Indu Sanjan, a younger cousin. There is much intermarriage, and most Parsis are somehow related. Indu did odd jobs for Dilip's son, Dom Sanjan, at the film studio, but they were not especially close."

"Is the Sanjan studio successful?"

Vija Rau shrugged. "It is small."

"What did Indu die of?"

"An auto accident. He was struck by a hit-and-run driver while crossing the street near the Taj Mahal Hotel."

A nurse arrived to cut short our visit, and we said goodbye as she led us out.

"Did you learn anything?" I asked Simon as we reached the street.

"Not a great deal, my friend. It seems likely that Indu Sanjan was murdered by the hit-and-run driver, but that doesn't explain what someone wanted with his bones."

"You think it was for some sort of devil worship?"

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Simon merely smiled. "Never invoke the bizarre until you have exhausted the mundane, my friend."

We went next to call on a film distributor who handled the output of Sanjan's studio. His name was Rudyard Chambers, and his traditional British bearing showed little trace of the Indian mother who Simon assured me had borne him. "Simon Ark," he said, repeating the name. "Yes, Dilip has mentioned you."

"I come as a friend of his," Simon assured him. "I am carrying out an investigation on his behalf. But you must realize there are some questions more easily asked an outsider."

"Of course."

"What can you tell me about Dilip's film-making operations?"

"You must realize first of all that Dilip Sanjan is something of an outsider here. The Bombay film industry is almost exclusively Hindu. So much so, in fact, that production of a new motion picture often starts with a sacred Hindu fire ceremony on the set. Sanjan's Parsi community is Zoroastrian, of course, not Hindu—an entirely different religion in a country where religion is still very important. The Parsis have excelled in shipbuilding, commerce, and industry, but there are few of them in the film business. Sanjan's little studio is unique."

"Has there ever been a hint of anything outside the law?"

"Never, to my knowledge. His pictures are small but quite respectable. He employs mainly actors from his own community, though he also sometimes hires Hindus."

Simon seemed satisfied with the information, though I couldn't see that it was leading us anywhere. Chambers saw us to the door and promised to help us in any way he could.

It was late afternoon when we returned to the hotel, and I was startled to see Reba Sanjan waiting for us in the lobby. Her face was drawn and anxious, and my first thought was that something had happened to her husband. But it was not Sanjan she had come about.

"Vija Rau was stabbed to death in his hospital bed!" she told us, so excitably we could barely catch the words. "An hour after you visited him!"

Simon Ark reached out to steady her. "Do they know who did it?"

"No—someone must have slipped past the nurse's desk!"

"Did your husband send you here?"

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She nodded. "He blames himself. He says Vija would still be alive if he hadn't summoned you."

Simon took a deep breath. "We must visit the tower of silence where Vija was wounded."

"It will be dark soon— There are no lights—"

"In the morning, then. Can you arrange it?"

"Only the hereditary pallbearers may enter the *dakhmas*."

"I know that." He repeated his question. "Can you arrange it?"

"Only by stealing my husband's key to the locked doors."

"Do it, then, before there are more deaths."

She sighed and nodded. "What time will you be there?"

"Nine o'clock. Meet us at the foot of Malabar Hill."

"That may be difficult. There is a funeral scheduled for that hour."

Simon hesitated.

"Vija Rau's," she reminded him.

We dined at the hotel, in a surprisingly westernized setting with authentic French foods and wines. From down the hall came the familiar sounds of a discotheque. "Western culture is found everywhere," I commented with a wry grin.

Old Sanjan had invited us to a studio party and film screening that evening, but he phoned after dinner to say he'd be unable to attend because of Rau's death. He urged us to go without him, saying his son, Dom, was expecting us.

Simon and I arrived around eight. The party was being held on the elaborate roof garden of the studio office building. One could walk among flowers and trees while commanding a striking view of the city's skyline by night. There were perhaps a hundred people at the party, representing a side of Bombay's culture we hadn't seen before. Many of the women were fashionably dressed in western style, though a few wore traditional saris. Some, in what seemed a compromise, wore saris over low-cut strapless gowns.

One girl in her twenties wore a striking arrangement of gold jewelry that hung from her left earlobe. She asked me, "Are you alone?"

"No, I'm with that gentleman in black."

She eyed Simon critically. "Is he a priest?"

"Of a sort," I sipped my drink. "Are you Hindu or Parsi?"

She giggled and pointed to the red *tika* mark in the center of her

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forehead. "Hindu. I thought everyone knew that! But there are many Parsis here tonight. They are very successful in the business world. Do you know Dom Sanjan?"

"No, I'm a friend of his father." I told her my name.

"I'm Sushi Mahim. Come along and I'll introduce you to Dom."

Sanjan's son was a tall light-skinned Indian in a grey business suit. He was about my age and he shook my hand vigorously. "I have already met Simon Ark," he said in the perfect English to which I'd become accustomed since our arrival. "I hope you enjoy yourself."

"It's too bad your father couldn't attend."

Dom Sanjan nodded sadly. "Two deaths in the family are a terrible blow. Vija Rau was not really related, but he and my father were hereditary pallbearers together."

"The other dead man, Indu Sanjan, worked for you?"

"Occasionally he did odd jobs at the studio. I told Simon I saw the car hit him. I was the first to reach his body. I tried to apply artificial respiration, but it was too late." He glanced at a younger group with some annoyance, moving us away from the noticably sweet odor of marijuana. "But what brings you to Bombay?"

"I'm the senior editor of a New York publishing house. We're doing a series of books on films around the world and I want to include a volume on the Indian film industry."

"Speak to Sushi here. She is a script girl at the Hindi Studios, the largest in India."

"Is that right?"

"We make nearly two hundred films a year," she answered proudly. "About one-third of India's total output."

"I was thinking Dilip Sanjan might write a book about the Indian film industry."

"But his view is so limited!" she insisted. "He is not Hindu."

"You have a point."

"The Parsis are businessmen, not artists. They barter in diamonds and drillheads—not in dreams."

Simon Ark had moved over to join us. "Very poetic," he told her.

Before she could answer, Dom Sanjan took us both by the arm. "We must go downstairs. The screening is about to begin."

Like most Indian films, it lasted nearly three hours. A complicated plot was broken at frequent intervals by singing and dancing, and the audience

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seemed to enjoy it. Sushi sat between Simon and me, translating in a low voice when she thought it might be necessary. At the evening's end she promised to put me in touch with a woman at her studio about the book.

On the way back to the hotel, around midnight, I commented, "At least I have a line on an author. But the evening contributed nothing toward your investigation, Simon."

"On the contrary, my friend. It may have contributed a bit."

That was all he would say.

We were out early the following morning, eating a quick breakfast and taking one of the black-and-yellow taxis to the foot of Malabar Hill. As we approached, we saw several cars of a funeral procession starting up the winding road.

"Follow along behind," Simon instructed the driver.

When we reached the summit we left the taxi and followed a line of white-clad mourners through the dense vegetation. In the lead were four men carrying a sort of stretcher on which the body was covered by a sheet. In their white shoes, white suits, and white caps, they reminded me of ambulance attendants removing an accident victim to the hospital rather than pallbearers carrying the deceased to his final bizarre resting place.

The procession of mourners paused before a high curving wall almost hidden by the bushes and trees. A key was inserted in the lock of the double metal doors and they swung open. A woman wept and moaned as the pallbearers entered the tower with their burden. Overhead I heard the flapping of wings and glanced up to see great black vultures settling onto the rim of the wall.

After a few moments the pallbearers came out with the sheet folded neatly on the stretcher and the procession started back down the hill. But suddenly Reba Sanjan detached herself from the line of mourners and hurried over to us.

"Here is the key," she whispered, producing it from within the folds of her white sari. "Be careful."

"Which tower was Rau in when he was attacked?" Simon asked.

"The next one along, to the right." Then she was gone, hurrying after the others.

We waited until they were out of sight and then went along the path

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to the next walled enclosure. From the outside it seemed identical with the first one, though I was glad to see no vultures hovering over this one. They were otherwise occupied for the moment.

"What do you expect to find here, Simon?" I asked.

"The person who stabbed Rau was obviously interrupted. If he feared recognition enough to kill Rau at the hospital, he may have been afraid to return here. Perhaps we may still find what he was seeking."

"What is there but bones? Didn't Sanjan summon you because he believed someone wanted bones for a Satanic rite of some sort?"

"There are easier ways to obtain bones. The evidence here points to something else."

"But the body was naked, Simon! And the vultures eat everything *but* the bones!"

"Let us see, my friend." He fitted the big old key into the lock and turned it. The metal door swung open on squeaky hinges. Simon left the key in the lock and we entered the sacred place.

The morning sun had just cleared the top of the enclosure's far wall, blinding us for an instant with its brilliance. We shielded our eyes and moved slowly around the circular stone platform, carefully avoiding the bone pit at the center. The platform was nearly empty, with only a few scattered bones to serve as reminders of its purpose. I was thankful at least that there was no recent arrival there to greet us. But almost at once, as Simon bent to examine the remaining bones, shadows began to darken the sky.

"Vultures, Simon."

"They think we bring them a repast."

"Aren't they satisfied with the one next door? Let's go!"

"Vultures do not bother the living."

As they swooped low above my head I wasn't so sure. "Maybe they can't tell the difference."

But Simon ignored them and went on with his search. When he'd circled the stone platform he turned his attention to the bone pit itself. The bottom was lined with skulls and bones, probably several feet deep. "You're certainly not going down there, Simon!"

"No, my friend." He glanced at the sky. "But let us wait here a bit."

"For what?"

"Perhaps the sun will do our searching for us."

"The sun?"

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"In less than an hour it should be high enough to shine directly into the pit."

"You mean we have to stay here for an hour?"

"Perhaps by that time you'll grow to love the vultures."

"I doubt it."

But we waited. I couldn't imagine what he expected the sun to reveal, but we waited.

"It would not have been too difficult for the mysterious assailant to lower himself on a rope and escape the same way," Simon observed.

"If anyone was crazy enough to want to." I glanced up at the vultures, who had retreated to the top of the wall. "What about the rope the assailant left behind after he stabbed Rau? Is there any clue there?"

"Not according to Dilip Sanjan. It was a common sort of rope, a kind sold everywhere."

I was growing more restless by the minute. "Wouldn't we be better off investigating Rau's murder at the hospital?"

"His murder began here. It only ended at the hospital."

Presently he walked to the edge of the pit to observe the sun's progress on the bleached bones below. "Do you see anything yet?" I asked.

"No," he admitted. "Let us give it five more minutes, until the sun reaches the far side."

"Do you think the intruder might have had a key, like we did?"

"If he had, he wouldn't have needed the rope, would he?"

"I suppose not."

Suddenly Simon gripped my shoulder. "There! Look there!"

I followed his pointing finger, but all I saw was the glimmer of something reflecting the sun. "What is it? A piece of glass?"

Before he could answer, there was a clanging sound behind us. Simon spun around, shouting, "The key!" I dashed to the metal doors, but it was too late. I heard the key turn in the lock.

"Someone's locked us in, Simon!"

"So it seems."

At first we tried shouting and pounding on the doors. Then I boosted Simon up on my shoulders and he attempted to reach the top of the wall. But his groping fingers were several feet short of their goal.

"Can you get a grip?" I asked. Simon felt around, but the old wall was too smooth to provide a hand- or foothold. He came down to the ground again. I settled down beside him. "Who would do this? Rau's killer?"

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"No doubt. I should have realized he would return after the funeral to have another search for his treasure."

"What treasure? That bit of glass in the pit?"

"Unless I am mistaken, my friend, that bit of glass is a diamond."

"A diamond! But how did it get here? Sanjan told us the dead were stripped of all clothing and jewelry before being laid out for the vultures."

"And so they are. The diamond—if that's what it is—was inside the body of the dead man."

I stared at him.

"Don't you see, my friend? When Vija Rau told us he surprised his attacker going through the bones of the man Indu, I suspected it had to be because Indu had something inside his body the killer wanted. Last night before the film showing I overheard that young woman Sushi mention that Parsis sometimes dealt in diamonds. That was the first mention of diamonds, but it was enough to give me something to look for."

"What if the vultures have swallowed the diamond—if there was one—or carried it away?"

"Perhaps they have. Indu himself might have swallowed several before he was killed by that car. But I do think at least one of them is down in that bone pit."

"Well, it's nice knowing I'm going to die so close to a diamond," I said.

"You won't die," he assured me.

"No? Then suppose you tell me how we're going to get out of here? We're locked in an enclosure with a solid twenty-foot wall all around, on top of a hill where no one comes and no one could hear if we were to set up a shout. And I'm sure that if we were to fall asleep those vultures would start pecking at us."

"You're needlessly upset," Simon said. "There are at least three ways out of here if you stop to think about it."

"I'll settle for one."

"Very well. Take off your shirt, please, and give it to me."

"My shirt?" I exclaimed and did as he said.

"Now give me your cigarette lighter."

I've virtually stopped smoking but I still carry a lighter. I handed it over and watched as he weighted the shirt with a piece of bone from the platform. Then he flicked the lighter and held the flame to the shirt. It took a moment to catch fire, and another moment before the flames spread, then he handed it quickly to me.

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"Your throwing arm is better than mine. Hurl it over the wall. As high as you can."

"But—"

"Quickly!"

I threw the flaming shirt with its bone weight, and watched it clear the wall.

"Are you trying to burn us up before the vultures get at us?"

"I hope so," he replied seriously. "The vegetation seemed quite dry when we were outside."

"Do you think it's catching onto anything out there?"

"If it doesn't, we'll try again with my shirt."

But a wisp of smoke soon appeared above the wall, and we could hear the crackling of dry underbrush. "What if no one comes to our rescue, Simon?" I asked.

"We're perfectly safe in here. The entire hilltop could burn without getting through these walls. But it should bring the fire department before long, and they'll get us out of here. I only hope they're Hindu firemen and not Parsi, or they may not want to enter here."

Simon was right again. The fire department arrived within twenty minutes. And they were Hindu.

Back at the hotel, I dug another shirt out of my suitcase. "What were the other two ways we could have escaped, Simon?"

"There is no time for that now. We still have a murderer to catch."

"Where do we start looking?"

"I would suggest right in front of this hotel, my friend. It was there that Indu was run down by the car, you'll remember."

"I wonder what he was doing there."

"We know that too, if you will only think about it. He was found with a tiny silver spoon in his pocket, yes?"

"For narcotics?"

"No—for cleaning out ears."

And then I remembered the professional ear-cleaners we'd observed on our arrival, working near the hotel's taxi stand.

We went down to the stand and observed the ear-cleaners for a time. "What do you hope to see, Simon?" I asked.

"Time will tell."

We had used the firemen's ladder to retrieve the diamond from the

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bone pit at the *dakhma*, and it now rested in Simon's pocket. I knew he was waiting for something or someone, but I couldn't guess what or who. "How do you know it'll happen today?"

"Because he thinks we're still up there, trapped and dying."

"But all I see are passersby having their ears cleaned out."

"An Indian custom, surely. But look at that man there. He's no Indian."

I followed Simon's gaze to a well dressed man of vaguely Germanic features. The ear-cleaner had pushed aside his long blond hair to get at the ear. "You're right, Simon. It does seem odd."

"More than odd. Come on!"

I followed him across the sidewalk and watched in astonishment as he gripped the hand of the ear-cleaner. "Call a police officer," he said to me. "Quickly!"

But suddenly a familiar figure had materialized at our side. It was Sanjan's son, Dom Sanjan. "What's the trouble here? Can I be of service?"

There was a moment of confusion, with Dom Sanjan reaching his arm toward Simon. Then I saw Simon falling, and heard the screech of brakes. I acted faster than I'd have thought possible, yanking Simon to safety as a car sped past us.

"Never mind me," Simon ordered. "Don't let him get away!"

"Who?"

"Dom Sanjan! He's the man behind these murders!"

The events of the next few hours tumbled over one another. We held Dom Sanjan for the police, and very quickly they also rounded up the ear-cleaner and the Germanic customer and the man who'd been driving the car that almost hit Simon. We were at the police station near our hotel, telling the authorities what we knew, when old Dilip Sanjan arrived with his wife.

"What is this, Simon? Did I summon you halfway around the world to bring disgrace to my family?"

"I am sorry, old friend," Simon told him. "I would have wished it to be otherwise."

"Dom cannot be involved."

"He is very much involved. Sit down and I will tell you."

The old man sat, and Simon began to speak, telling it as he had told the police not an hour earlier. "It was diamonds, it was all for diamonds. A clever smuggling operation involving a pipeline from South Africa. The

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Germanic-looking man was a South African, one of several who smuggled the diamonds out of the mines and into India. Their system was next to foolproof. The South African hid the diamonds in his ears, wearing his hair long to further conceal them. Outside our hotel he visited one of the professional ear-cleaners, who removed the diamonds while doing his cleaning. The diamonds were then passed to Dom Sanjan who, I suspect, sent them to their ultimate destination inside film cans shipped from your company."

"I can't believe that!" Dilip protested.

"Let Simon speak," Reba said, resting her hand on his arm.

"But somehow Indu betrayed the gang and started keeping some diamonds for himself and Dom Sanjan had him run down by a car and killed. The diamonds he was carrying were not found, though, and it was not until after the funeral that your son and his cohorts realized Indu had been in the habit of swallowing the gems after removing them from the ears of the smugglers. So one of the gang was sent to search the *dakhma* for the remains of Indu Sanjan. It was while he was looking for diamonds among Indu's bones that Vija Rau surprised him and was stabbed."

"But why was Rau later killed at the hospital?" Reba asked.

"He told me that seeing the intruder crouched among the bones in the *dakhma* was like viewing a film. It seemed that way, I suspect, because the intruder was a young actor who worked with Dom at the studio. He couldn't risk Rau identifying him later. It was this same man who drove the car that killed Indu and almost hit me today."

"It is a good story," Dilip said. "But what evidence is there to implicate my son?"

"He tried to push me in front of the car today when I caught the diamonds being passed. That is enough evidence for the police. For myself, there is the simple fact: the *dakhma* intruder had to know the diamonds were inside Indu when he died and not simply in his pockets. The only person who could have told him that with assurance was your son Dom, who admitted he was the first to reach Indu's body after the accident. He even told of applying artifical respiration—hardly a wise maneuver after a traffic accident when there could be broken bones and internal injuries. But it helped disguise Dom's real purpose while he searched the dead man for the diamonds. I'm sorry, Dilip, there were other things pointing to your son as well."

"Such as?"

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"Rau half remembered his assailant from a film, and Indu worked at the studio for your son. Dom was the most likely link between the men. You or Reba could not have been involved because then the *dakhma* intruder could have used a key instead of a rope to enter the enclosure and search for the diamonds."

Dilip Sanjan had little more to say, and within the hour his son Dom had confessed to the charges, even admitting he'd been the one to lock us in the *dakhma*.

Later, Reba found us alone and said, "You have brought my husband great sadness, but you have brought him truth as well. It is better for him to know the human greed that defiled our dead than to conjure up demons where none existed."

I saw Sushi's friend the following morning and arranged for the book on Indian films. Then Simon and I flew home from Bombay. Shelly met us at the airport—I didn't tell her about the vultures.

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McQuade had been on his way to a higher-security prison . . .

THE GLASSHOUSE

by GERALD TOMLINSON

"Oh, it was Dan McQuade all right," the owner of the service station said, leaning against a yellow pump. "Public Enemy Number One, as they used to say. Bald as a turnip. Thick horn-rimmed glasses. Dumbo ears. Complexion like a dead fish. He was even wearing his prison grey, they say, but I can't swear to that. Cataracts." He pointed to his filmy eyes.

"You recognized him right away?"

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"No, I can't say that I did. Not the way I recognized you, Mr. Reno. But of course I've seen your picture quite a few times in the *Daily News*. Front-page photo the time you caught Mad Dog Hanson. Then just a few weeks ago when they said you were being sued for false arrest. You nabbed a neurosurgeon in Albany, thinking he was the Saratoga Strangler?"

"Defamation of character, actually. We settled it out of court," Reno chuckled without mirth. "Win some, lose some. Now about McQuade. When did you find out who he was?"

"Not until the cops showed me his mug shots. When I saw him walking across my asphalt lot carrying a toolbox, I figured he worked at Standish Glass. It was almost midnight, time for the graveyard shift to start."

"Then it wasn't you who called the police?"

"No, it was someone else. I just went back to the station after gassing up a VW. Half a dozen people had already spotted him, it turned out. Ten or fifteen minutes later a whole fleet of police cars pulled in, lights flashing, sirens screaming. Law all over the place. Haven't had so much excitement since Prohibition."

"And you were the last person to see McQuade?"

"The very last, according to the papers. Six weeks ago. Nobody's laid eyes on him since. He walked past my pumps and disappeared. You've got to hand it to him, Mr. Reno. Cops after him like a plague of locusts. Roadblocks set up every way from Sunday. He just vanished into—"

"Thin air."

"You said it." He coughed. "Pretty embarrassing for the people at the reformatory too. Never lost a dangerous prisoner in transit before. Just some minimum-security kids once in a while. They were running psychological tests on McQuade up there—I.Q. and the like. Then they were going to ship him off to Dannemora. He was in for life, you know. Killed a bank guard and a woman teller in a Bronx holdup. Too much temper."

The questioner, a small wiry man in his early forties, pointed over the gas pumps, past a row of ramshackle grey houses, toward two tall smokestacks down the street. "Is that the Standish Glass factory?"

"That's it, Mr. Reno. Old Man Standish's glasshouse."

"Was it searched that night?"

"Searched? It was practically demolished. The cops came pretty near to looking for McQuade in every beer bottle that came off the line.

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Believe me, there wasn't a square inch of anything between here and downtown that wasn't gone over with—"

"A fine-tooth comb."

"So help me."

Kidd Reno filled his tank with high-test from the yellow pump, thanked the old man, and took off in his 1937 Ford V-8 coupe, a car he had souped up to racetrack performance.

Reno, a paradox like the 120-mph Ford, disliked routine, yet he had the brisk, efficient look and the precise military bearing of an ex-Army colonel, which he was. He had joined the service at eighteen as a private, attended OCS, and served in counterintelligence, trailing a host of spies during the Cold War.

Now retired, he tracked down criminals for cash rewards, and his efforts sometimes put his name in the papers and his face on TV. He disliked the publicity though, since a detective, like a counterspy, gained effectiveness through anonymity, and lost it through press notices.

He parked in a visitor's space at the glassworks, a rutted dirt rectangle with a stenciled sign across the street from the main entrance. It was 3:20 in the afternoon, a cloudy day in late May, threatening rain. A round-faced guard with a plum nose lounged beside the open wire gate, reading a newspaper. He nodded at his visitor without interest. Reno walked through the gate.

Inside, he paused in a kind of paved courtyard and looked around. To his right was a small wooden shack with peeling white paint and an open door at either end. The shack held four time clocks, some bare overhead lights, and rack after rack of time cards. To his front and left, three doors stood at varying distances from him, giving access to three different buildings. He chose the nearest building and walked in.

He entered a vast room, one side of which was dominated by enormous rust-colored furnaces attached to long tunnel-like machines for molding bottles. Glowing columns of bottles emerged from these machines in tight formation, cooling as they went. A dozen production lines led the bottles to packers, mostly women, who worked singly at the end of each line, standing under a descending track of empty cartons and near a huge metal wastebin for rejects and missed bottles.

A dreary job, it seemed to Reno, but fascinating to watch. Practiced hands, racing the columns, dropped the bottles, four, six, or eight at a

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time, into cartons, then stacked the cartons on wooden skids. Forklift trucks removed and replaced the wastebins and skids.

Reno continued to the end of the building. There a short passageway led to a newer building in which other furnaces and other lines were spewing forth soda bottles. Off to the left to the room he noticed a glassed-in area lined with banks of vending machines. The lunchroom was filled with plastic tables, at which a few workers sat, sipping coffee, eating candy bars. No one spoke to Reno through the motion and hum.

He went back to the front of the first building. A metal staircase led to a large mezzanine framed with steel girders and floored with oak planks. Miniature trolley tracks fitted with rollers spiraled downward toward the lines, carrying empty cartons to the packers.

Up in the carton department, hot as a jungle, big fans whirring, salt-tablet dispensers on every post, he saw a platoon of T-shirted, hard-muscled men at work. They stood behind big floor-mounted staplers, assembling cardboard boxes and Chenango beer cases.

Again no one noticed him. Surprising, he thought, this indifference, sine he was the only person in the place wearing a suit. Maybe they thought he belonged to management and therefore ought to do whatever talking needed to be done. Maybe. But they didn't look as if they saw him at all.

Reno noticed that there was still a third level above the carton department, a mezzanine for the mezzanine, reached by narrow winding stairs on either side of the building, as well as by a freight elevator in the middle.

He took the front stairs. Up in the loft, slightly cooler than the first mezzanine, he found stacks of flat, baled cartons still to be stapled. The loft was a dim universe filled with cardboard. Half the breweries whose names he knew were represented on the flat cases in colored inks and familiar designs.

Then he saw a human figure, a man crouched at the top of a skyscraper of flat Chenango beer cases, watching Reno's movements. When the man saw he had been noticed, he hopped down to the plank floor, using the tiers of cartons as if they were steps for a giant.

The man was no giant, though, but a man of medium height, dark and heavily bearded, with piercing grey eyes and long hair falling to his shoulders. His mouth was hard until he spoke. "Can I help you?" His voice was surprisingly soft, a contrast to his fierce appearance.

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"I'm a visitor," Reno said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "Kidd Reno from Brooklyn."

"I'm a foreman," the man said. "Willard Huggins, strictly from hunger. I'm looking for goof-offs, as usual. I guess you don't qualify."

"This looks like a good place to goof off. Especially if you're a horned lizard."

Huggins nodded. "A sack rat, you mean. It's damn near perfect. I could spend my whole shift up here just trying to corner goof-offs. Management—" He stopped. Reno caught the faint odor of whiskey on his breath.

"I'm not management."

"Well, management is pretty easy on these guys most of the time, but they do crack down now and then. Some wife calls in; she's sick, or drunk, or maybe crazy, and she wants to talk to her husband. He's punched in on the time clock, he should be here, but he's missing. Can't find him anyplace."

"He's up here sleeping?"

"Sometimes. Hell, we've got gorillas in the carton department who can hit their union limit, way over the company quota, in five hours. That gives 'em a nice bonus on the paycheck, and they've still got three hours to snooze or slop down beer—if somebody downstairs keeps their chute full for 'em. Half the time they're here, half the time they're down the street in Tiny's Bar. A girl named Sally O used to have a whole operation of her own up here behind the beer cases, but management got wise after a couple of months and threw her out."

"Were you on duty the night they searched the factory for Dan McQuade?"

"Not me. I'm strictly swing shift. That was the graveyard shift. Art Chernow would have been on. He's a good foreman, gets the cartons out, but he's too easy on goof-offs. He lets 'em snore their time away up here if they want to. Not like me. That night, though, he flushed out four sack rats: one pimply-faced clerk and three carton men. Oversleepers from the four-to-twelve shift. The cops made him find 'em. Man, those guys were scared." He laughed. "You looking for the cop killer?"

"Dan McQuade? Yes."

The foreman nodded grimly. "Tell you what, you find him, you keep him from going back to the reformatory. O.K.?" The soft voice had an edge.

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Reno didn't answer.

"You know what they were doing with him up there at the reformatory? Giving him a bunch of tests, I.Q. tests, like he was a school kid. Here a coddle, there a coddle, everywhere a coddle-coddle." He spat on the planking. "You carry a gun under that jacket, Reno? You find that cop killer, you use it. O.K.?"

Reno shook his head. "Sorry, Huggins. I'm after money, not blood. I don't care if they give him a jail cell with Irish linen, Waterford crystal, and a hot line to every Sally O in town." He headed for the stairs. Huggins didn't move or speak.

The next stop was the office of Standish Glass, a ranch-style building that stood well apart from the factory. The inside of the office was bright stainless and antiseptic white, its ambiance clashing with the dark and lovely receptionist whose Greek surname followed "Helen" and whose smile, in the right era, could have launched ships.

Reno tried a smile of his own, launching nothing more than a bored question. "Your name?"

"Kidd Reno."

Her lashes moved. "How exciting. Is that K-I-D, as in Billy the Kid?"

"No. K-I-D-D, as in Captain Kidd. I'd like to see the personnel manager. I don't have an appointment."

"Just a moment." A button clicking, a telephone light flashing. "Mr. Jamieson, there is a Mr. Reno Kidd to see you. K-I-D-D. And 'Reno,' as in Nevada." A pause. "Go right in, Mr. Kidd. Third door on your left down the hall."

"Thank you, Miss Helen. It's Kidd Reno. Kidd first, Reno second. As in Kid McCoy."

"Oh? Sorry." She clicked her gum apologetically.

The personnel manager was a blond youngster, tanned and starched, smiling and eager. He grabbed Reno's right hand and elbow in one motion and pumped them as if expecting water to flow. "Glad to see you, Mr. Kidd. Welcome to Standish Glass. Have a seat. Have a cigarette. What can I do for you?"

"Mr. Jamieson, my name is Kidd Reno, and I'm a private investigator from New York City. You probably know that the First Exchange Bank of New York has offered a twenty-five-thousand-dollar reward for information leading to the arrest of Dan McQuade."

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The personnel manager scowled and cleared his throat. "I'd better repeat my first question. What can I do for you, Mr. Reno?"

Reno took a cigarette, waited for Jamieson to light it, and spoke with slow emphasis. "You have no security whatsoever in this factory, do you? Or hasn't anyone told you?"

Jamieson drew his swivel chair forward, planted both elbows on his desk, and ground his heels into the carpet. He looked wary, as if he suspected that top management was springing a trick on him. But his answer made sense.

"You'd be surprised how few people want to steal no-deposit no-return bottles."

Ignoring the answer, Reno went on. "You have no badges for your employees, no visitors' sign-in procedure, no real guards, no nothing. I could walk in with the men on the graveyard shift and never be noticed. Right?"

A grunt. "Be my guest, Mr. Reno. If you want to do it, go ahead."

"I don't want to do it, Mr. Jamieson. But I'll bet Dan McQuade wanted to, and I'm guessing he did."

A deeper grunt. The personnel manager smoothed his unruffled tie. "You're wrong. The police searched the factory that night from top to bottom. Every employee was accounted for. Five men from the four-to-twelve shift were dragged here from—" he cleared his throat again "—Tiny's Bar down the street. They hadn't punched out yet. One man was brought back from—" he reddened under his tan "—Millie Arnold's place on Tyler Avenue. We had everybody here, nobody missing, nobody extra."

"How many people work at Standish?"

"As of this morning, one thousand two hundred and eleven, counting all shifts. Glass factories work on a twenty-four-hour basis every day. The furnaces never shut down except for cleaning and repair. We have two swing shifts and a graveyard shift."

"And high employee turnover?"

Jamieson shrugged his shoulders. "We pay better than most local factories; there's a strong union, but the work here isn't what you'd call challenging. A packer can look very quick and impressive to an outsider, but anybody with ten fingers can handle the job in a week or so. It's dull work. In the carton department, King Kong, and I mean King Kong, can start pulling his weight in half an hour. It's unskilled labor."

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Reno nodded. "Thirty percent yearly turnover, would you say?"

"More like forty percent."

"I thought so. Who's the psychologist at the reformatory?"

The personnel manager scratched his head. He seemed used to abrupt shifts in the conversation and took no notice. "Let's see, there are quite a few on staff. The head psychologist is somebody named Anton Devereaux. A man with a national reputation if you can believe the newspapers."

Reno thanked him and left.

The Elm City reformatory stood on a low hill that had once been the site of an Iroquois "castle," or village; it now housed first offenders from all the cities and villages in the state. It also served as the reception center for older convicts, like McQuade, on their way to higher-security prisons. It had a reputation among penologists for a good rate of rehabilitation. Its college-campus appearance matched its reputation.

Anton Devereaux lived up to his billing too. He was a psychiatrist rather than a psychologist, and his office walls were laden with framed diplomas, photos under plastic, and brass-and-walnut plaques. "It pays to advertise," Reno said, scanning the memorabilia.

"It impresses more people than you'd think," Devereaux said in a Southern drawl, his owlish face half hidden behind a file folder. "Who does your publicity impress, Mr. Reno? Receptionists, secretaries, naive young women who should say no to your inquiries? I doubt that it impresses the neurosurgeons of Albany any longer."

"Touché, Dr. Devereaux. Now, as your naive young secretary told you, I'm interested in learning about Dan McQuade. Especially about how he escaped."

The psychiatrist studied Reno through aviator eyeglasses and partially closed eyes. "The newspaper reporters were interested in the same thing. So are about two thousand other prisoners who pass through here every year. They'd like to try out Dan McQuade's method, see if they can make it work for them. Well, the press didn't find out how he did it, the prisoners haven't found out, and you won't find out."

"Thanks for the help."

"I can tell you this, though—the escape was clever. Simple but brilliant, if I may say so. Dan McQuade is a genius. I.Q. of 164, maybe higher if he took the test seriously, and a charmer as well. I doubt that a reward-

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chasing private detective, even one with your skills, will find him except by accident."

"The jails are full of charmers and geniuses, Doctor."

"Of course." Devereaux laid the brown folder on his desk, glanced at his watch, and started to get up. "I don't think I can be of any assistance to you, Mr. Reno."

Reno stayed in his chair. "I think you can, Dr. Devereaux, and it won't take you more than three minutes. We know, don't we, that McQuade had an accomplice? The tool box he was carrying didn't come from the reformatory. It came from someone outside, probably someone with a police record. Certainly no one would smuggle McQuade out of town."

"The accomplice theory is widely held by the police and reformatory officials." Devereaux's manner was stiff, distant. He obviously didn't like being detained by a layman, but he went on. "Most of McQuade's friends have police records, of course. He has no home, no family."

"Yes. Now, Doctor, we know where and when McQuade disappeared; that is, we can almost pinpoint the spot where he put on his disguise. Let's say it was the service station's rest room, which seems likely since the empty toolbox was found fifty yards away. How far could he walk after that? Even with contact lenses, a toupee, a skin-darkener, and a little cash, he couldn't go far. The town was swarming with cops. The immediate area has only two physical features; private houses and Standish Glass. I think he went to Standish Glass."

"An earth-shaking deduction, Mr. Reno." Devereaux, with his warm drawl and his cold eyes, had a way with sarcasm. "Everyone in town thought so that night too. But the factory was turned upside down, searched from top to bottom, and he wasn't there."

"He wasn't found. I think he was there. And if he was, he had to know a lot about Standish Glass before he made the visit. He had to know its location, how it operates, what its security is like, and so on. He had to know how to walk into it and disappear. I think that's possible, but not without planning. McQuade's a Brooklyn boy like me. He'd never been to Elm City before; he'd served his time in other states. How could he know so much about the glassworks?"

"From someone else." Devereaux raised his eyebrows thoughtfully. He opened the brown file folder, which Reno assumed was McQuade's, and began running his eyes down the papers, turning each one over with a professional air. "Yes, it would be helpful to discover his informant—who

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may or may not have been his accomplice, of course. The reformatory officials think they know his accomplice, a man named Carter, and that knowledge hasn't gotten them anywhere."

Finally Devereaux clicked his forefinger on the desk, looked up, and with no change of expression picked up the phone and dialed. The ten digits said long distance. "Dr. Fernald, please," he said after a few moments. "Ah, Jerry. This is Tex Devereaux. Fine, thanks. Could you tell me if John Bettenheim, one of your inmates, is a native of Elm City?" He tapped his fingers on the desk and gazed at Kidd Reno's bow tie. "Thank you. I thought so. Did he have any kind of connection with the Standish Glass factory here?" More drumming of fingers. "Yes, I see. Thanks again. Will I see you at the New Orleans convention in June? Oh, good. Say hello to Trudy. Goodbye."

Devereaux glanced at his watch again. "Your three minutes are up, Mr. Reno, but I'll give you the information you want. A man named John Bettenheim, a forger, was Dan McQuade's cellmate for two years at Lewisburg. Bettenheim was born and raised in Elm City, worked eight months in the Standish Glass carton department after dropping out of Eastside High School ten years ago. He's now living in Pittsburgh. He's been on parole for the past five months. Sufficient?"

Kidd Reno stood up and shook Devereaux's hand warmly. "That's it, Tex. I'll bet you all the dollars in Dallas that Bettenheim, or a man named Carter for that matter, came to Elm City a couple of months ago, hid the tool chest with McQuade's disguise in it somewhere below the reformatory, and did one other thing. Do you know what it was?"

"No, I don't. That's what they're paying you the big reward for, isn't it, Mr. Reno? As for me, I'm not a betting man. And I'm certainly not betting on *you*. I'll see you—"

"In the funny papers?"

"To the elevator."

It was 7:15 P.M. when Reno parked in the rutted dirt space for visitors at Standish Glass. A gaunt scarecrow had replaced the fat guard. A new shift was on. The gaunt one, like his predecessor, was reading a newspaper.

Reno went up the steps to the carton department, where Schuetz beer cartons had replaced Chenango. Nothing else seemed different. "Where's the foreman?" he asked a man in olive drab who pointed toward a man

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in khaki. "Hello," Reno said to the man in khaki, a puffy-faced splotch. "Where's Willard Huggins?"

The foreman answered with a look of consternation. "What?"

Reno repeated the question.

The foreman grinned. "Somebody's been playing a joke on you, mister. Willard Huggins died six years ago."

The staplers clattered in the background. Kidd Reno, sweating in the foreground, felt a shiver race down his back. The expected answer to this conversation-starter was that Willard Huggins had gone off duty at 4:00 P.M. The next question carried a note of worry. "Do you know the men on the graveyard shift?"

"Not well. I've worked it a few times though."

"Is there a dark man with a full beard on the shift? Medium height, long hair, sharp eyes, tight mouth, soft voice."

The foreman puzzled it over for a moment. "I think I know who you mean. He's a fairly new man. Not very tall. Not a good worker. Hangs around the plant a lot during other shifts. That's why I know him; I see him quite often. He's talkative but strange. He's been accused of stealing lunchboxes. Let's see. Van Something. Vanderpool, I think."

"Would he have a time card?"

"Sure."

"Would the time card tell his date of employment?"

"Sure, they all do. Printed in the upper right-hand corner."

"Thanks."

Reno took the steps two at a time, sprinted through the courtyard into the wooden shack with the time cards, and ran down the rows until he came to "Vanderpool, Bernard."

There it was: Vanderpool's date of employment, April 13, the day (starting at midnight) after McQuade's escape. But that was the least of the news.

Today Bernard Vanderpool had punched in at 12:01 A.M., out at 8:02 A.M., and then out again at 3:53 P.M., less than four hours ago. To remove any doubt, he had written in red ink beside the second punch-out: "So long, Reno. Six weeks in the carton department is enough for anybody."

It confirmed what Reno had suspected. It ended his doubts about the disappearance. The answer was clear.

John Bettenheim, McQuade's friend from Pittsburgh, or a man named Carter for that matter, had applied for and gotten a job in the Standish

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Glass carton department under the made-up name of Bernard Vanderpool. No difficulty in that, given the high turnover in the factory. The nonexistent Vanderpool, a name only, was to begin work at midnight on April 12–13.

McQuade timed his escape accordingly. At a few minutes before midnight Dan McQuade, wearing the disguise out of his toolbox, probably with some money for the vending machines, possibly with some forged indentification, walked calmly in with the graveyard shift, reported to Art Chernow, identifying himself as the new stapler, Bernard Vanderpool, and was hard at work on Chenango beer cases by the time the police charged in twenty minutes later.

No one had bothered about the full-time employees, not even the new ones, because of the everyday turnover in the glassworks. Instead they had concentrated, foolishly but understandably, on the missing workers, the goof-offs in the loft and at the bar down the street. All of those, and all of the scheduled workers on the graveyard shift, were finally present and accounted for, including the transparent Bernard Vanderpool né Dan McQuade.

Yes, Reno had figured it out. Great. But he had assumed, carelessly, perhaps fatally, that Dan McQuade had long since left Standish Glass for other surroundings, friends or no friends, home or no home. And he was wrong. McQuade had found his perfect sanctuary, a glasshouse, a protective house of glass, and he had lived in it—literally lived in it—for six weeks, the biggest sack rat of all. He had left only after spotting the too-well-known Kidd Reno hot on what should have been a stone-cold trail.

Kidd Reno dashed out of the shack into the blue-grey smog, and crossed to an outdoor phone booth near the chain-link fence. He barely saw the dial through his darkening frustration. What he did see was a bundle of reward money, twenty-five thousand dollars, fluttering away in the murky night air. A few drops of rain splattered on the phone booth.

Reno dialed zero. "Hello," he barked into the mouthpiece, jarring an innocent telephone operator, his breath coming in short puffs, his mind focused on the meager facts he had managed to assemble. Grasping at what he knew was no more than half a hope, he snapped, "Operator, get me the Pittsburgh police."

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A little tap on the head wouldn't hurt the old geezer a bit, Bruno said . . .

COLD CACHE

BY LOUISE S. BROWNLEE

We didn't intend to kill the old man. But with gold getting close to $800 an ounce, the temptation to follow him to the cache and take the poke away from him was too much to resist. "Any day now," Bruno kept saying.

We had arrived back in the gold country of southwestern Montana three weeks before, just after New Year's, ready for a strike of our own. We were in a cabin on the edge of the Ruby, where the streams had once yielded up millions in gold, near Virginia City where Sheriff Henry

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Plummer had run the gang of road agents that robbed miners of their gold. History country.

Now, on the twenty-fourth of January, with the snow frozen solid from the ten-below temperatures and our drafty cabin practically shivering around us, I peered out the window for the second time since dawn. Across the road squatted the little cabin in the cottonwoods, its backdrop the mean little mountains that looked like doubled fists, even now grasping the gold we knew was still in them.

We were cold. Bruno and I come from a warm climate, and this was killing me. When we'd planned it this fall I felt smart, but now I was cold and uncomfortable enough to feel stupid.

"Smartest thing we ever did," came Bruno's voice from the depths of his sleeping bag as dawn tinted the sky outside. "Just pure luck we hit through here last summer and heard about old Floyd's gold. And leave it to me to dream up that story about writing a book on the gold country for my master's thesis." He snorted with laughter. "Master's degree! If my old man finds out I'm not in school this quarter there'll be hell to pay—he'll cut my allowance."

And Bruno had a good allowance. Outside in the cold stood the brand-new four-by-four pickup he'd bought when we'd hatched our plan—the vehicle that would take us anywhere old Floyd went when he took off to pick up his gold.

"Have another look, Eddie my boy," he said to me. "Get more wood in that stove too. I can see my damn breath."

I scraped frost off the window—my breath froze on it right away. Outside, puffs of smoke rose straight up from Floyd's chimney into the icy dawn air.

I shoved kindling into the stove. "You were supposed to get up during the night and keep this going," I complained. "Damn it, Bruno, you gotta hold your end up more. You haven't split wood or worked on the fire once, and we've been here three weeks!"

"Yeah, yeah. And put some coffee on before you get back in the sack."

I did. As the stove grew hotter and spread a small circle of warmth, we talked about the good fortune sitting across the road from us in a snug winter-tight cabin.

Old Floyd Higgins had to be eighty if he was a day. He was a wily old coyote—I had figured that out before we were long into our plot. The situation was ludicrous. Everyone in this wretched little town knew about

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the gold, knew it was there, but they didn't try to discover where.

Bumming around the country last summer we had come into this town of Buffalo Jump—if you could call it a town—a bunch of scattered buildings, some with historical roots in the gold-rush days. While having a beer and visiting with the barkeep, we'd learned about old Floyd. It was only curiosity that took us down the road to his place. We'd watched the old guy talking with tourists and showing little kids how to hold a gold pan, and later on we had talked to him.

The old guy came right out with it. "Got me a gold find up in them mountains," he'd said. "See these nice nuggets?" They were whoppers—big, every one of them.

We hadn't believed him. "There's gotta be a catch," Bruno had said as we stomped back to the bar.

"That old man told us he has a gold mine," Bruno had said to the burly bartender. We were just curious then—our greed had not yet been awakened.

The barkeep had laughed, a warm friendly rumble. "There's no mine, kid. This here is free gold—placer, like with a gold pan, you know? Floyd might have to dig down a little, but not far. This is high-grade gold. He always takes off into the hills when the water is low, usually in the fall, and comes out with a poke big enough to see him through the winter. He caches most of it so he doesn't have it all on him at once. In wintertime—maybe January—he visits his cache and brings the big poke out. Sheriff takes him to Bozeman to sell some of it and stock up. The nice nuggets he gives away or sells to the tourists." The barkeep looked us over with twinkling eyes, his mucular forearms crossed on the bar. "That right, Sheriff?"

"Right."

We turned. A big man with a badge stood behind us, western and friendly. He ordered a beer.

"Well," I blustered, "somebody could follow him and take his claim away from him."

"Never do to follow the old fox on foot, boys," the Sheriff said. "Many have tried it. We used to worry about old Floyd, but we don't any more. He can backtrack and lose anybody up there. Those hills hide his secret well, and it'll die with him. He's been in those mountains and canyons for near seventy-five years, and he and the country know each other."

When we got back to school for the fall term, Bruno hatched the plot

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to rip off the old guy when he went after the gold in his cache. "The bartender said January," Bruno said. "We'll go to Buffalo Jump after New Year's."

We didn't register for winter quarter. Bruno bought the four-wheel-drive and we showed up in Buffalo Jump on January third, telling the locals that we were back to write the history of the town and the gold-rush days for Bruno's master's thesis. We moved into the only suitable cabin—the one across the road from Floyd. I carried a notebook with me and pretended to take notes. It worked like a charm. Nobody seemed to think it was at all strange.

Now, snuggled deep in his sleeping bag, Bruno continued in a drowsy voice. "I've learned enough by now to know that old Floyd usually takes off down the road in his truck after a snowfall—though what the hell *that* has to do with anything I don't know. He comes back with the gold from his cache before the end of the day. When he leaves town he heads down toward that open spot in the mountains to the south—the one they call Still Smoking—where the river comes through. The road's narrow. He can't take that old truck across country, so the cache has to be near the road. We can follow at a distance, grab the gold, and just keep going south."

"I don't want to hurt him," I said.

"We won't. Anyway, a little tap on the head won't hurt the old geezer. They do it on TV all the time."

Bruno was rich and selfish, but not very bright.

So we had watched the cabin for three weeks, with Bruno practically salivating as the price of gold skyrocketed, and with me anticipating Easy Street through the rest of college.

It was fun, if you didn't count the cold and the frowning, unwelcoming country. We watched old Floyd and we hung out at the bar, sitting by the wood stove, drinking beer and watching Floyd's cabin through the window. We were careful that nobody suspected. But the barkeep and the Sheriff were friendly enough. We had nothing to worry about.

One night the barkeep showed us some nuggets Floyd had given him. "He always pays me handsome for his little tots of bourbon and the burgers and fries the missus fixes him. He gave her a big nugget last year for Christmas. He's a real nice old man. We're all like family here in Buffalo Jump. You stick around, you'll see."

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One evening while I was sitting alone by the wood stove, old Floyd stumped in and poured himself a shot of bourbon behind the bar. He looked like one of those pictures of the mountain men—roughly dressed, with big boots and a beat-up hat. His eyes peered out from a red muffler—one was pale and rheumy, the other badger-bright and sharp.

"Evenin', youngster," he said in a strong voice as he dragged a chair around with his boot and sat down. As I visited with him I realized that you never really could guess what the old guy was thinking. He made me a little edgy: That sharp eye seemed to look through me and know why I was there.

"You're nuts," said Bruno as we lay in the sleeping bags waiting for the cabin to warm up. "The old guy is dim—running up in the mountains to a gold find he's never filed a claim on. If we weren't interested in a fast buck I bet we could follow him next fall and get hold of the thing—and maybe we will. But right now we're just going to follow him to his cache and take the poke. Man oh man, that'll be a lot of bread. Gold hit $826 an ounce yesterday."

We dressed and ate breakfast, and I looked out the window again. As soon as I saw the old man come out of the cabin and head for his truck, I knew this was the day. He fussed around his truck a little while we hurriedly rolled up our sleeping bags, grabbed the typewriter, and prepared to abandon the place. Then he drove off to the south, with us about a quarter of a mile behind.

The day was raging with cold. A light wind kicked up a little of the fresh snow, but the sky was as bright blue as sapphires. In the south, against the mountains that appeared black at the tops like bruised knuckles, was the filmy white spot known as Still Smoking, where the river cut through the hills. Floyd's green pickup bounced slowly toward it. He was in no hurry. "He's going straight for Still Smoking like the barkeep said," Bruno pointed out.

The green pickup drove around the bend into Still Smoking. Then, as we drove past the huge boulders that lay on the banks of the river, Floyd's truck vanished. Ground fog seemed to creep off the river and out of the road itself. White fingers of it crawled over the truck hood. The wind whistled and grew to a shriek, throwing fresh snow against the windshield. Within a quarter of a mile we had slowed to a crawl, visibility zero. Fog combined with the flying snow had choked us off.

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I opened my window to peer for the edge of the road, but the wind drove snow into the pickup and took my breath away.

"God. This is what they must mean in this country by a white-out," said Bruno. "Floyd'll have to stop too. He can't see in this stuff either."

"He doesn't have to," I said. "Don't you see? That's what he waits for—for Still Smoking to look white and smeary against the mountains like it did today. He knew there was a white-out here. He knew nobody could tail him. He knows this country like one of the animals, and it protects him. He knows where to stop, where to turn"—a branch squeaked at the window—"by trees like that one at the edge of the road."

"I'm stopping." Bruno pulled to the edge of the road—or what we assumed was the edge—and suddenly the truck lurched and plummeted down into the whiteness, the metal underneath us screaming as huge boulders tore into it. With a lurch we stopped. The motor began to hammer and the oil light flashed on. Bruno clutched the wheel, sobbing with fear, staring at the white nothingness that pressed in on us. The bare branches of an alder scratched at the window like the claws of an animal.

So we sat. . .

Three hours later we saw traces of trees, touches of color—the blue of the sky, the red of the Sheriff's jeep at the edge of the road above.

Shivering, we climbed out. The Sheriff knew we had been following Floyd. His eyes told us that.

"Real white-out, boys," he said. "Fresh snow, fog, and crosswinds. That's why the Indians called it Still Smoking. Hard for strangers to understand—have to experience it. Scary, huh? Like the land is turnin' against you. Floyd came back a while ago with his poke. He always comes out by a different road than he goes in."

The Sheriff leaned against his jeep. "Your truck is a real mess, boys. Oil all over them rocks. You stay right here, do a little thinkin', and I'll get a wrecker to haul you to Bozeman. I see you have a few bruises too. Oh, my. And there's all your gear in the back of your truck. Good idea. Time you was movin' on. Don't think we haven't enjoyed you. Me and the barkeep—you've noticed his size, haven't you?—we don't want to see you back in these parts again. You've been beat. This country just won't cooperate with you."

He started his jeep, backed around, and disappeared down the white canyon. We stood there, and the wind in the alders laughed.

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Robert Arthur Carson was essentially in prison . . .

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

by T. M. ADAMS

J.D. walked along the water's edge, letting the sand sift between his toes and trying to feel like a vacationer. He looked out to sea, stretched, and jogged from the sheer cliff at one end of the beach to the high ugly fence among the rocks at the other end, a distance of 300 yards. He stopped there, puffing and leaning against the cool chain links, wondering if the fence were really necessary to protect the privacy of the beach; he had never seen any of the local children it was supposed to keep out.

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He shrugged and started back across the sand, enjoying the sea breeze and the sun on his back. A nice day for swimming, he supposed; but although he regularly had vivid dreams in which he was a strong and effortless swimmer, J.D. was in fact morbidly afraid of the water. It was one of those funny things.

Something gleamed in the surf: a bottle. J.D. bent and picked it up, pleased to see that it was corked and contained a message. Whether a love letter from a sailor or the corniest joke imaginable, it was bound to break the monotony.

He dropped down on his haunches, pulled the cork with his teeth like a regular beach bum, and began to read.

"THIS IS NOT A JOKE. I DESPERATELY NEED YOUR HELP," it began. Good start, J.D. commented. "My name is Robert Arthur Carson," it continued, and J.D. stopped there, puzzled. The name was definitely not familiar to him—indeed, he could not remember having ever known anyone named either Robert *or* Carson, common as those names might be. But something about the way the name looked when written out in the author's left-handed script seemed to ring a bell. J.D. pondered this briefly, then let it go.

The note went on: "I am thirty-two years old and, by almost anyone's standards, very well off. I have a steady income from a trust established by my father. I have no living blood relatives. I'm not a playboy or a loafer or anything like that. I hold non-paying positions at my alma mater and a private foundation, and I usually find other worthwhile ways to occupy myself.

"However, my wife left me a little over a year ago, and I guess I didn't take it very well. I mean, I know I didn't. For nine months or so I was spending money as lavishly and unwisely as I could—trying to convince myself I was having a good time, I suppose. I put a great deal of pressure on my trustee, an attorney named Franklin Baxter. In addition to managing my trust fund, he was in charge of all my investments. When he couldn't produce ready cash fast enough to suit me, I suspected him of trying to protect me from myself. Now I put a different interpretation on his actions.

"Anyway, a few months ago my binge ended in a wild party at an expensive hotel. It was a fiasco. The police were called in and they made drug charges against some party-crasher. I discovered I didn't have enough cash on hand to cover damages to the suite—or a number of other

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bills I'd thought Baxter had already taken care of. The next morning a man I'd never seen before claimed I'd knocked him down in front of the hotel; he was suing. In short, I was suddenly up to my ears in legal troubles, and in no condition to handle them.

"That's when Baxter stepped in. He paid all the bills, cleaned up the legal mess, and sent me to dry out at the private seaside clinic where I am now. As soon as I had pulled myself together, he came to visit me and we had a heart-to-heart talk. I was very grateful to him, naturally. I told him I was through with wild living, I was ready to buckle down and go back to work. For one thing, I said, I thought it was time I took the running of my financial affairs into my own hands.

His response to this suggestion was noticeably cool. I thought perhaps he resented the prospective decrease in his retainer, but now I believe he had even more to fear. Let me emphasize that, no matter how much money I ran through last year, the holdings Baxter manages for me still represent a not inconsiderable fortune.

"Soon after Baxter left, I discovered I was not allowed to have visitors or make telephone calls. Then came a rapid and nearly complete turnover in doctors here, and many of the people under treatment were transferred away. I'm almost the only patient here now who isn't a vegetable, and I've come to suspect that the others are really phonies—undercover guards. Nothing has been admitted and everyone remains very polite, stalling me off and keeping me busy with diets and exercise programs and so on, but essentially I'm in a prison—and I think I know who holds the key.

"I don't quite get it though. I wish I could remember exactly what papers I signed when I came here. I think that if I were committed for life Baxter would have to undergo some sort of outside audit—ditto if I were to die or disappear—and the IRS would then catch on to whatever he's doing with my money. No, he has to keep me alive and lucid enough to sign things occasionally, but totally incommunicado.

"Why doesn't he just lock me up in a cellar somewhere? The only answer I can think of is that if he did there would be no plausible cover-up if I were somehow to escape, whereas, the way things are, the clinic could probably invent some plausible medical reason for holding me against my will.

"What I'm afraid of is that they're working on some method to hide me in plain sight here in the clinic, that they've got a way to turn me

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into a robot so dependable they'll be able to bring in real patients again and cover all traces of their crimes. I'm not saying I know *how* this could be done, but that's my hunch. I do know that once a week I have to report for so-called hypnotherapy sessions, and that afterward I can't remember a thing about them. Presumably it's during these sessions that I acquire the needle marks on my arm. (Sodium pentothal? Heroin?) And up until a few days ago, when I secretly stopped taking my medication, I was heavily tranquilized twenty-four hours a day. Is that standard treatment for an alcoholic—even if I really am one?

"Perhaps they suspect I'm ducking the tranquilizers, or maybe they're just making doubly sure of me. But this week, under the flimsiest of pretexts—something about frayed ligaments showing up in one of my x-rays—they've decided they're going to put a cast on my left arm, immobilizing both elbow and wrist. Whether that's to keep me from climbing the fence or swimming away or from writing notes like this, I don't know. I tried to get off a first message a few days ago, but it got hung up on a sand bar and drifted right back in this morning. Fortunately, I spotted it first. They don't watch me every single moment, but somehow I think this rewrite is going to be my last chance—every day I feel my grip on reality becoming weaker—so please read this note. *Please* believe it.

"I NEED YOUR HELP. On the other side of this page you'll find the name and location of this clinic as best I can remember it, along with the name and address of an old classmate of mine who is now with the District Attorney's office. If you'll just get this note to him it will be worth a considerable reward when this matter is cleared up. PLEASE BELIEVE IT."

J.D. reread the note twice and spent twenty minutes looking out to sea. A message in a bottle was the hoariest of cliches, and yet . . .

Perhaps because of the uneventfulness of his own existence, he had been entirely drawn into the strange tale—he had found himself sympathetically flexing and stretching his own left arm when the mysterious cast was mentioned, and he had taken a look at the two names and addresses on the back of the note to see whether by any chance he recognized either of them. He did not. Most likely it was a hoax, but the narrator seemed very real to J.D., real and pathetic—a man who'd obviously always had it a little too easy in life, only to discover it wasn't necessarily desirable to be "taken care of."

Suddenly, J.D.'s considerations took a surprising turn, and he decided

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to rebottle the message and throw it back into the sea. His pitch was powerful but clumsy—as usual.

He went back up a rocky path to the terrace of the building where he was staying, rang for a drink, and asked for a pencil and a piece of paper. When they arrived, he slowly wrote out the name "Robert Arthur Carson" in his own cramped hand, and compared the result with his mental image of the left-handed version in the message.

Ah, now J.D. knew what had been familiar about it! He had almost been taken in though.

What had given everything away was the cast on the arm. If there were guards to keep Carson from swimming and climbing to freedom, why the cast? Not to prevent him from writing—not with the other hand still free. Besides, Carson's captors must never have considered the possibility of a message in a bottle or he would never have been able to send one off.

But suppose Carson's captors wanted him to learn to write with his other hand, or rather, to do *everything* with his other hand? Suppose they took their hypnotism and drug treatments a step further, and instead of just removing Carson's memories, began to plant false ones—such as the idea that he was really right-handed? They could have kept his left arm immobilized for, say, three months (J.D. remembered how sun-faded the paper of the message had been) and then, once he'd been mentally prepared, removed the cast. Muscle atrophy would have caused the left arm to be weaker than the right, confirming the victim in his new conditioning. (J.D. had broken into a sweat; the whole scheme was coming to him at once, like something known rather than something reasoned.) The result? A thoroughly disoriented personality, always trying to find its way back to normalcy from a false starting-point, always demoralized and pliable because of the sheer physical clumsiness that resulted from trying to do everything with the wrong hand. And how clever: no physical damage, therefore the victim would still be able to sign things for his captors under hypnosis, and a post-hypnotic suggestion would keep him unable to write with that hand at all other times.

Slowly, J.D. shifted the pencil to his own left hand and poised it over the sheet of paper. He had read many times that no one can be hypnotized to harm himself. Even if the process were backed up with drugs, it would be a very fragile snare; the victim could always tear his way out, given only the knowledge and the will.

His hand was shaking. It was no use. It felt *wrong* to hold the pencil

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this way; he simply couldn't manage the letters properly. Maybe it was all wrong, then. Maybe that pathetic note had been just one more false start.

But at the thought of the message in the bottle, his left hand moved. Smoothly and effortlessly, as if of its own volition, it wrote out the words "PLEASE BELIEVE IT"—and he believed it, and it was all Robert Arthur Carson could do not to cry.

Once he had accepted the idea, it was easy to think of other proofs (for instance, the comparative lack of tan on his left arm). "Almost taken in though," he murmured, tearing the paper into unreadable bits.

"Did you say something?" Dr. Ross asked, coming up behind him.

"Nothing," he replied. "Just talking to myself. Is that a bad sign?"

"Not at all," Ross said, his dead grey eyes belying his smile. "Good auto-therapy. Were you writing something?"

"I tried, but my hand still feels awfully cramped and clumsy. Isn't that strange?"

"It's hard to say what's strange in a case of total amnesia like yours," Ross said easily. "Don't force it. Just keep taking it easy. I wonder, J.D., if you happened to remember anything today?" A few nurses materialized, as unobtrusively attentive as ever.

"Nothing much," Carson said, in his role as "John Doe," and shrugged. Nothing that you didn't already know, you ghoul.

"Well, we'll try to get at that memory in tomorrow's hypnosis session," Ross said, and Carson thought, I bet you will. The question is, what can I do about it? Sure, there are hardly any guards around now—I guess they think I'm harmless and don't want to make me suspicious—but they'd be crazy not to watch that fence.

Ross was still talking. "We've finally decided what we can do for you surgically. We think a minor brain operation at the source of the, uh, congestion might just—uh—"

"Relieve the pressure?" Carson suggested, and everyone nodded. Carson picked up the pills they had put next to his drink and pretended to swallow them. It would be less trouble getting out of his room tonight if they thought he was asleep. He tried to look as though he were considering the proposed operation; in fact, his grim expression came from considering the sea route as escape, impossible for a terrified non-swimmer like him.

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I'm still in a bottle, damn it. I mustn't let them know I'm on to them though.

With utter sincerity, he said, "Doctor, I'll take any risk to get my memory back. I want to be able to tell people who I am."

"Good!" Ross said. He turned to go. "And don't worry about that talking to yourself. It's good therapy. I even write notes to myself sometimes—it helps clarify thinking."

Carson nodded distractedly as they left him, all of them no doubt happy to see him so docile.

It seemed hopeless. He was still in their hands; tomorrow they would go right back to work on him. What good had the message done him, really? What was the use of knowing there were fewer guards than there used to be, that they no longer watched the beach, so long as they still watched the fence? It wasn't as though he could—

With a cry halfway between a groan and a laugh, Carson made the first instinctive move of several months, slapping his forehead with the heel of his left hand.

Why had they *ever* guarded the beach? Or, to put it the right way around, *just who had told him that he was afraid of the water?*

Six weeks after his spectacular eight-mile swim to freedom, Robert Arthur Carson could finally go out in public without being mobbed by reporters. Although there were still some gaps in his memory, his friends agreed that he seemed as mentally keen as ever, more self-reliant, less inclined to drift. His recovery had been aided by his ex-wife, Lorraine, who had turned up as soon as she'd heard of his troubles. There were already rumors that a remarriage was in the works.

One Friday night Carson and Lorraine were dining on the terrace of a small seaside restaurant with some friends, including Ralph Harris of the District Attorney's office. Carson was moodily watching the moving lights on the water as Harris told him the latest developments in the case against Franklin Baxter, Dr. Ross, and the rest.

"Most of the small fry at the clinic are squealing now," Harris was saying. "Apparently the place had been involved in shady practices for years and, as their lawyer, Baxter knew all about it. He blackmailed them into going along with his plans for you. At first they hoped that hypnotic manipulation, backed up with drugs, would hold you securely enough to satisfy him, but he—quite rightly, as we know—kept after them to

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come up with something more permanent. Eventually Ross did manage to find a surgeon crooked enough to consider an operation."

In a low voice, Lorraine asked, "What did they plan to do, exactly?"

Harris shrugged. "Well, I don't pretend to understand the medical end, but I gather that memory isn't stored in any one place in the brain; some functions are localized. For instance, a victim of 'total amnesia' still remembers his native tongue, song lyrics, nursery rhymes, and manual skills like knot-tying or knitting or—in Robert's case—signing his name."

"The only job I ever held down," Carson said ruefully, "besides coaching the swimming team at school."

Harris continued. "Anyway, this defrocked surgeon Ross dug up intended to permanently destroy the part of Robert's mind governing his identity, but still leave intact his ability to produce the signatures Baxter regularly needed for powers of attorney, transfers of property, and so forth. Buddy, you got out of that place just in time.

"In fact, you're luckier than you know. According to the police oceanographer, if you had managed to pitch your bottle past the sandbar the odds are highly against anyone ever having found it. That it should have hung there for six months and then come back to you was the best break you could have had."

There was an uneasy lull after these remarks. Lorraine shivered delicately and then said, in a deliberately cheerful tone, "I think that calls for a toast."

Carson turned his gaze from the ocean and slowly raised a glass with his good left hand. "Very well," he said. "A toast: To the sea—" he paused, as if for an afterthought, and smiled "—my deliverer."

The October 27 Issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale October 2.

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Hal Johnson had a yen to meet the lady with the sexy phone voice . . .

THE REWARD

by JAMES HOLDING

I didn't want to waste my time on another fruitless call at Annabel Corelli's home, so I telephoned her at eight-thirty Friday morning.

After two rings, I heard the receiver lifted and a voice said, "Hello." The voice was unmistakably female and it sounded like contralto coffee cream—rich and very, very smooth. It gave me such a jolt of pleasure that for an uneasy moment I felt somehow disloyal to Ellen Corby, one of our librarians, whom I'd been assiduously courting for over a year.

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I said, "Is this Miss Annabel Corelli?"

"Yes." The way she said it painted an instant image of a tall, Junoesque creature in a string bikini walking along a tropical beach.

"My name is Hal Johnson," I said, "and I'm calling about your overdue library book, Miss Corelli. I stopped at your house yesterday to collect it, but you weren't home."

"I'm almost never home in the daytime, Mr. Johnson. I'm an Argyll Lady. I'm just on my way out to work now." That figured, I thought, a door-to-door cosmetics lady. With that voice, she ought to be able to sell skin lotion to a porcupine. "I'm sorry about the book," she said. "I'm afraid I let a friend borrow it and then forgot all about it."

"It's six weeks overdue," I said, "and it's a one-week book, so it's costing you a bundle in fines."

"I'm really sorry, Mr. Johnson." Her voice caressed me. "How much do I owe on it?"

I told her.

"Well, how about if I leave the book and the fine in my carport for you so you can pick it up today while I'm out?"

I said, "Today? But if you've lent the book to a friend—"

"No, today'll be fine," she said with a laugh. "The friend I lent it to lives here with me."

Lucky friend, I thought as I hung up.

I stopped at Miss Corelli's house in the East End in mid-morning. Sure enough, there was the library book— *The Hong Kong Diagram*—on a shelf in the carport, with the exact amount of the fine neatly stacked on top of it. A cornerpost concealed the book and money from anyone not specifically looking for it.

As I put the book on the back seat of my old Ford, it occurred to me that Annabel Corelli must do pretty well as an Argyll Lady. Her house was nothing elaborate, but it was no hovel either—two-story white clapboard with green shutters and a neat yard attractively planted. And the carport was a two-car job. Maybe Miss Corelli's friend contributed to the budget. I felt a vague sense of regret that I hadn't been able to meet the lady and her exciting voice in person.

That Friday was a busy day for me. By the time I'd made the last call on my overdue list, the hot August afternoon had already gobbled up my usual cocktail hour and was shading rapidly toward dinnertime. I was

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tired and out of sorts, and I felt sticky. I wanted a long shower and an ice-cold martini, straight up. So instead of returning to the library to check in my books and fines before I knocked off for the day I went straight home, luxuriated for twenty minutes in the shower, and had not one but two ice-cold martinis before dining in bachelor loneliness on a double package of frozen chicken chow mein.

I cleaned up the dishes, listened to the news on television, then turned it off, feeling fidgety and restless and wondering how long it was going to be before Ellen agreed to marry me—or at least let me see her more than two evenings a week, which was my present ration.

Thinking about Ellen reminded me of Annabel Corelli's sexy voice, and that in turn reminded me of her overdue library book, *The Hong Kong Diagram*. It was a relatively new novel of the stolen-nuclear-device-endangers-the-world school, and a suspense blockbuster.

It was full dark now. I went out the back door of my garden apartment into the garage, unlocked the car, and, by the light in the dome, rummaged through the stacks of books in the back seat until I found *The Hong Kong Diagram*.

Have I mentioned that I'm an avid reader? Well, I am. I'll read anything—from coffee-table art books to paperback gothics. I've found that reading's the best way to educate yourself beyond the few basic disciplines you get in college. When I was working as a homicide detective under Lieutenant Randall, before I decided to become a library cop, I'd taken courses in speed reading and memory development. You know how an ambitious rookie in any new job can be an eager beaver? That was me. But, as a matter of fact, the speed reading and memory training come in very handy in my present work, which, as you've probably gathered by now, is to run down overdue and stolen books for the public library.

I figured I could probably zip through *The Hong Kong Diagram* in a few hours. At the very least, it would amuse me until bedtime. I relocked the Ford and went back inside, riffling through the book, looking for anything that might inadvertently have been left between the pages. The "shake-out" is standard procedure with me when I collect overdue books, and you'd be surprised at some of the items I've discovered. I once found a brand-new hundred-dollar bill in a library book borrowed by an offset printer on the South Side. From the alacrity with which he grabbed the bill and thrust it out of sight, I've always suspected it might have been one he'd printed himself.

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There wasn't any hundred-dollar bill in *The Hong Kong Diagram.* There was, however, a list of addresses written in a careless scrawling hand on the back of a sales slip that carried the heading "Argyll Cosmetics." A memo, I concluded, to herself from Miss Annabel Corelli.

I ran my eye down the half-dozen addresses. They didn't mean anything to me. But they might be important to a door-to-door Argyll Lady. At the very least, I thought, they gave me an excuse for further exposure to Annabel Corelli's golden voice.

I dialed her number and waited eagerly for the sound of rich contralto. What I got, after two rings, was a harsh, impatient baritone. "Yes?"

I said, "Is Miss Corelli there?"

"Who's calling?"

"Hal Johnson from the public library. I spoke with Miss Corelli this morning."

"Hang on."

I hung on, reflecting on the sad fact that Miss Corelli's live-in friend, judging from the depth and proprietary sound of his voice, seemed to be a man—and not another woman, as I'd imagined. Probably a Fuller Brush Man, I thought sourly.

"Hello, Mr. Johnson. Didn't you get your book O.K.? It was gone from the carport when I got home."

"I got it, Miss Corelli. And thanks. But I found a memo in it and I thought maybe you'd need it."

"A memo?" she said with a puzzled lift to that gorgeous voice.

"Yes. A list of addresses written on the back of an Argyll Cosmetics sales slip. Maybe a list of calls you plan to make or something."

She hesitated a moment. Then, "Oh, yes, Mr. Johnson. I recognize it. It *is* a call list, but I don't need it any more. You can throw it away."

"O.K. I just wanted to be sure it wasn't important."

"It was terribly nice of you to call about it."

"Not at all, Miss Corelli," I said. "Good night."

I hung up, tossed the list in the wastepaper basket, and started to read *The Hong Kong Diagram.*

The ads were right; it was a suspense blockbuster. It made me so nervous I couldn't get to sleep until after midnight.

Wild coincidences do happen occasionally in library work like mine, just as I suppose they do in other businesses. I was at my desk in the

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library the next morning, working on my weekly records, when I got a telephone call from my old boss, Lieutenant Randall of Homicide.

"Hal," he said, "do me a favor." It sounded more like an order than a request, but that was in character for Randall when he was in a hurry.

"Like what?" I asked noncommittally.

"Like saving me a trip to the library. You can get me the information I need quicker than I can—if there is any."

"What do you need?"

"Any information you can dig up about one of your card-holders named Josephine Sloan. A twenty-seven-year-old woman. Single. A live-in maid. One of your best customers, judging by the stack of borrowed library books in her room."

"Who has she killed, if I may ask?"

"Nobody that I know of. She was reported missing on the eleventh of this month by her employers, a Mr. and Mrs. Gaither. When the Gaithers got home from a weekend at the shore on that date, she was missing."

"Along with the family's jewels and silver?"

"No. Nothing was missing except the maid."

I said, "Since when have you been switched from Homicide to Missing Persons?"

"I haven't. Josephine Sloan's body was found yesterday afternoon by some kids playing in Gaylord Park. The body, with a badly cracked skull, was stashed under an overhang along the creek bank. It could be a hit-run, murder, or any other damn thing except a natural death."

"Well, in that case," I said, "sure. I'll nose around for you. But her employers ought to be able to tell you a hell of a lot more about her than any of our people here."

"Her employers can't give us anything that helps. We've tried. Since they were away, they don't know anything about her activities that weekend. To hear them tell it, she was a model maid—industrious, efficient, quiet, honest, no known boy friends." Randall cleared his throat. "Which figures, I suppose. She was quite unattractive."

"I still don't get why you think we can help you, no matter how many library books she read."

"The post-mortem shows her death had to have occurred that weekend. And we've only got one lousy lead to her movements that weekend."

A pause.

"Something to do with the library."

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"Right. Apparently one of the last things she did before she went missing was to borrow eight books from your library on Saturday, the eighth—two weeks ago today. You and your people are probably the last ones to have seen her alive."

"O.K.," I said with a deep sigh. "What do you want me to do?"

"Ask around about her among your Saturday staff and volunteers. Find out if anybody knows her. Does anybody remember her coming in on the eighth? Has anybody ever noticed her with a boy friend at the library? Did she, by some freak of chance, say anything to anybody about her plans for that weekend? Or about her employers being away? You know what I want, Hal. A starting place, that's all."

"I'll try, Lieutenant," I said, "but don't hold your breath." I took out a pencil. "Josephine Sloan. Twenty-seven years old. A spinster. Unattractive. Address?"

"Same as her employers'," said Randall. "The R. C. Gaithers. Thirty-four North Linden Drive."

I took it down. "I'll be in touch."

"Thanks, Hal." We hung up.

That's when the coincidence showed up. As I looked at the address I'd just jotted down on my pad, I realized I'd seen it before very recently. In fact, only last night. On the call-list bookmark left in her overdue library book by Annabel Corelli, the Argyll Lady.

After plenty of questioning, what I got for Randall out of our Saturday staff and volunteers was exactly zero. We have four girls on the checkout desk of the main library, including Ellen, and only one of them had anything of even remote interest to reveal about Josephine Sloan, and that was Ellen herself, who, after much thought, said she vaguely remembered checking out some books for the name Sloan on the Saturday morning in question. Beyond that, nobody could remember anything at all. In fact, though two of the other girls and one of our men volunteers were familiar with Josephine Sloan through her frequent visits to the library, not one of them had ever exchanged any more words with her than were necessary to check her books in and out.

Before calling Lieutenant Randall with the bad news, however, I decided, on the basis of that odd coincidence of addresses, to take another look at Annabel Corelli's call list, which should still be reposing in the wastebasket at my apartment. The library closes early on Saturdays. I

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went straight home, dug the list out, and was pleased to see my memory hadn't let me down on the Sloan address. It was there all right, along with five others—34 North Linden Drive.

There was something else there too, something that hadn't registered with me the night before when I'd found the list and telephoned Annabel Corelli. I stared at the tiny figures for a moment, then reached for my car keys.

Twenty minutes later, I was sitting across the desk from Lieutenant Randall at Downtown Police Headquarters. "You got something for me?" he asked hopefully.

I shook my head. "I'm sorry. One of the girls remembers Sloan checking out her books on that Saturday, but that's all. And you already knew that."

Randall sighed. Then he shot me a sleepy look from his cat-yellow eyes. "So why are you here?"

I told him about the Argyll Lady—about her overdue library book, her live-in boy friend, her bookmark memo with Josephine Sloan's address on it. He snorted. "Your Argyll Lady probably called on the Gaither woman to sell her some cosmetics."

"Right, Lieutenant. But look at the tiny figures under the Gaithers' address there." I handed him the list and pointed.

Randall peered at them. "Eight dash eleven," he read aloud. "The other addresses all have numbers too. Probably order numbers. Or appointment dates." He paused and his eyes narrowed. "Dates," he repeated softly. He lit one of his vicious stogies and puffed acrid smoke across his desk in my direction. I coughed. "Dates," he murmured again. "The eighth of the month is approximately when the Sloan girl was killed. And the eleventh is when the Gaithers came home from their weekend and reported her missing. Is that what you're getting at, Hal?"

"Could be," I said.

"Let's find out."

Randall was never one to waste time. He called a police clerk into his office, gave him the list of addresses, and told him to get the names and telephone numbers that went with them. While we waited, Randall smoked in silence and I sat on the hard chair and remembered to be grateful I was no longer a homicide cop. Sissy library fuzz or not, it was a lot more restful collecting library books than murderers.

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The clerk was back in eight minutes. Randall grunted his thanks, picked up his phone, asked the switchboard for an outside line, and dialed one of the numbers the clerk had just handed him.

After a short wait, a woman answered. "Mrs. Symons?" Randall said. "This is the Police Department." His tone was as bland as vanilla pudding. "Maybe you can help us. We're investigating a mugging that occurred on your street on the night of—" he read the tiny numbers under the Symons' address from the call list "—either the twenty-seventh or the twenty-eighth of last month. Were you at home those evenings, can you remember?"

Mrs. Symons' voice squawked in the receiver. Randall held the phone far enough from his ear so I could catch her words. They were heavily freighted with indignation. "A *mugging!*" she said. "What's the *matter* with the police in this city? It wasn't a mugging at all, as you ought to know very well since you spent a whole morning here at my house investigating it!"

"Oh-oh." Randall was abject. "We must have our wires crossed here, Mrs. Symons. If it wasn't a mugging, what was it?"

"Our burglary here! They stole every bit of sterling silver we had in the house!"

While she paused for breath, Randall repeated his question. "Were you at home that weekend, Mrs. Symons?"

"At home? Of course not! If it hadn't been Parents Weekend at our daughter's college, we wouldn't have lost our silver. The house was empty." Her voice went shrill. "But I've already *told* all this to one of your men named Leroy! And we haven't heard a *word* from him in almost a month now! *Some* police department! Lucky for us we were insured!"

Randall soothed her. "I'll ask Detective Leroy to get in touch with you at once. I can't understand this mixup, Mrs. Symons. I'm very sorry—please believe me." Mrs. Symons gave the Lieutenant an unladylike raspberry and hung up abruptly.

Randall grinned. "Remind you of old times, Hal?" he asked. He picked up the phone again and asked for Detective Leroy in Burglary. While he waited, he talked to me around his stogie. "We'll take it from here, Hal. Thanks for the lead—"

It was a dismissal. I stood up. "Thanks aren't enough," I said. "I want a reward."

"Reward?" He glared at me.

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"Reward," I repeated. "If you decide to interview the Argyll Lady at any point during your investigation, I want to be there."

"What for?"

"So I can see what goes along with that sexy voice," I said.

The following Friday night, Randall called me after midnight. I'd just come in from a dinner and movie date with Ellen. Randall said, "Hal? You in bed yet?"

"Almost," I said. "Why?"

"We've got your Argyll Lady here. If you want to collect that reward, come over to headquarters."

"Now? It's after midnight!"

"So your Police Department never sleeps. You coming?"

"What happened?"

"I'll tell you when you get here." He hung up with a crash.

I sighed. I was tired and sleepy. I wanted to go to bed, not downtown—not even to meet the girl with the sexy voice. After Ellen, Farrah herself would be an anticlimax. But I'd asked for it. I put my jacket and tie back on and went out to the car.

The Lieutenant was alone in his office when I got to headquarters. He smirked at me, and waved me to a chair.

"Couldn't this wait till tomorrow?" I asked.

"You said you wanted to meet her. She may be out on bail tomorrow."

I said, "Don't tell me *she* killed Josephine Sloan."

"I won't tell you anything unless you shut up." He was enjoying himself.

"O.K.," I said meekly.

"The minute Detective Leroy in Burglary saw that list of your Argyll Lady's," Randall said, "we were practically home free. It was just routine from there on."

"Let me guess. All those addresses had reported burglaries too?"

He nodded. "Four out of six. All committed when the owners were out of town and the houses were empty. On the dates indicated by the little figures under each address."

"And silver was stolen from all of them?"

He nodded again. "With the price of silver today, did you know you can get several grand at the smelter for a set of sterling flatware that retailed for only a few hundred bucks ten years ago? Silver's very big in the B-&-E business these days."

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"Even a library cop is aware of that," I said sarcastically. "So what about Annabel Corelli?"

"In each case, she'd made a sales call at the burglarized house shortly before the burglary took place."

I grimaced. "So she *did* set them up. A crooked Argyll Lady. She makes a call and during a friendly conversation learns when the lady of the house and her family will be away. She notes the best prospects for a large silver haul, and the dates when no one should be at home."

Randall blew smoke. "A neat operation. You got to admire it."

"I do. But I still don't see how it gets you anywhere with the Sloan murder."

Randall treated me to one of his unblinking yellow stares. Then he said, "In each of the four burglaries, entry into the house was effected the same way. By means of a hydraulic jack." I must have looked puzzled, because he went on to explain in a patronizing tone.

"You cushion the pushing head and the footplate of a jack with foam rubber and position it horizontally against the edges of a door frame about the level of the lock. When pressure is applied, the jack spreads the doorposts apart enough so the lock and deadbolt tongues are drawn out of their sockets and the door can swing open. When you leave the house with your loot, you release pressure on the jack and the door frames spring back to vertical again, reseating the bolts in their sockets as though they'd never been touched. And the only sign of a break-in having occurred is a couple of shallow pressure marks on the doorposts made by the jack."

"Well, well," I said, "what'll they think of next? I still don't see—"

But as I uttered the words I did see. "You found the same jack marks on the doorposts of the Gaithers' house."

"The very same," said Randall. "Exact match of the marks on the other four break-ins. Although nothing was reported stolen at that address, remember. Only the disappearance of the maid. Yet a break-in had obviously taken place. Are you beginning to get it now?"

"Yeah. Corelli set up the jobs, and she and her boy friend probably worked them together. But when they broke into the Gaithers' house, it wasn't empty, as they expected it would be. The maid was there. She probably caught Corelli and friend at the silver chest and recognized Corelli as the Argyll Lady who called on Mrs. Gaither. So the fat was in the fire, unless—"

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Lieutenant Randall nodded. "Unless something was done to keep the maid from talking. So they did something. They killed her, and, leaving the silver behind, they relocked the door, packed the maid into their car, and hid her body in Gaylord Park, six miles away."

"Do you have any proof of all this?" I asked.

"Some circumstantial stuff. And when their lawyer gets here and we can interrogate them, I'm hoping for more. Anyway, we sure as hell have proof they're silver thieves if nothing else. We caught them red-handed, about two hours ago, burgling the last house on your list." Randall yawned cavernously. "A blackjack in the boy friend's pocket could be the Sloan murder weapon. It's at the lab now. And the boys have found a few faint bloodstains on the upholstery of the back seat of Corelli's car that may give us something."

Randall noted my sour expression and said cheerfully, "Hal, my boy, you were dead right about your Argyll Lady. She's a real dish. Wait'll you see her."

He picked up the phone and spoke into it.

Two minutes later, Annabel Corelli appeared in the doorway escorted by two uniformed cops, one holding each arm. Even without makeup, her auburn hair in a tumbled mess and her clothing in disarray, she was something to see. She was really impressively beautiful—and big. She must have stood almost six feet tall and tipped the scales at a good hundred and sixty-five pounds—every one of them distributed in the proper place.

Randall stood up politely. I also got to my feet. The Lieutenant said, "Miss Corelli, let me present Hal Johnson from the public library. I promised him he could meet you in person if that list of addresses he found in your library book should help us with this case."

She seemed momentarily taken aback when she heard my name. Then she smiled at me very sweetly. In that unforgettable voice, she said, "I *am* glad to meet you, Mr. Johnson."

Trying to hide my embarrassment, I started to mumble something fatuous, I don't remember what. But I didn't get a chance to finish it. Annabel Corelli pulled sharply away from her guards, took two steps toward me, drew back her right arm, and slapped me so hard I fell back against Randall's desk, my head ringing like a church bell.

They hustled her out but I could tell by the frown on Lieutenant Randall's face it was all he could do not to laugh himself sick.

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It was one of those days when everything went wrong . . .

WORSE THINGS CAN HAPPEN

by J. F. PEIRCE

It was one of those days when everything goes wrong.

I awoke late. The lighted numerals of my bedside clock-radio were flashing on and off, signalling a power failure during the night. The sun's rays were streaming in at the window. I looked at my wristwatch. It was almost eight. My alarm had been set for six-thirty.

I jumped into my clothes without shaving, grabbed my flight bag, and started to drive like mad to the airport. I was stopped twice—the first

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time by a flat tire, the second by a highway patrolman. Fortunately the patrolman was understanding. After listening to my story, he handed back my driver's license and waved me on.

"Drive carefully, Mr. Jordan," he said. "Worse things can happen than missing your flight."

His remark was prophetic.

I did drive carefully and arrived at the airport, not an hour early as I'd intended but after the other passengers had boarded the plane.

One of the clerks on the desk alerted the pilot to hold the flight, then hurried me through the security check and on board.

A harried stewardess slammed the door shut the moment I cleared the doorway. "There's an aisle seat halfway back, Mr. Jordan," she said. "Please hurry!"

As I passed the gallery next to the first-class compartment, a heavyset, middle-aged male attendant gave me a hard look.

I put it down to his pique at my having delayed the flight, and to my appearance. Not only was I unshaven, but my hands were dirty, and my clothes rumpled from changing the tire.

I gave the attendant a half smile and hurried past, carrying my flight bag in front of me.

The attendant followed—no doubt in a hurry to see me buckled in so we could be on our way.

As I walked down the aisle I had the feeling everyone was staring at me. I wanted to apologize, to explain about the power failure, the flat tire—my reasons for being delayed.

I spotted the empty seat three rows ahead and at the same time caught sight of *them*—John Avery, my former best friend, and Mary, my ex-wife.

I stopped in mid-stride and the flight attendant almost bumped into me. My flight bag hit my knee and I raised it chest high with both hands.

For a split second I debated whether to speak. The divorce had been anything but friendly—messy, really. I'd caught them in the act, as they say. And Mary had brought up a few of my own peccadillos which I'd foolishly bragged about to John when we were friends.

What the hell, I thought. Why not be civilized? Life's too short to bear grudges.

Besides, I was trapped.

I started to speak and my voice sounded too loud even to me.

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Then something hit me in the back of the head. I felt a sudden pain, saw a sudden flash of light, and that was all.

I awoke lying in a hospital bed. My mind was fuzzy, my vision blurred. I shook my head to clear away the shadows and all but cried aloud from the pain. But my mind did clear. My vision came back into focus. And I became aware of voices. I turned carefully.

A policeman and a nurse were talking in the open doorway.

"There was an anonymous call," the policeman said, "that someone planned to hijack the plane. When Mr. Jordan arrived late, he aroused the suspicions of an F.B.I. agent dressed as a flight attendant. The agent followed Jordan down the aisle. When Jordan attempted to take over the plane, the agent gave him a karate chop to the base of the skull and knocked him out cold."

What was he talking about? This was crazy!

I lay still, tried to concentrate.

Why would the F.B.I. agent think I was attempting to take over the plane? All I had done was—

Then it hit me. I had decided to speak to John and Mary. I had said, "Hi, Jack, hi—"

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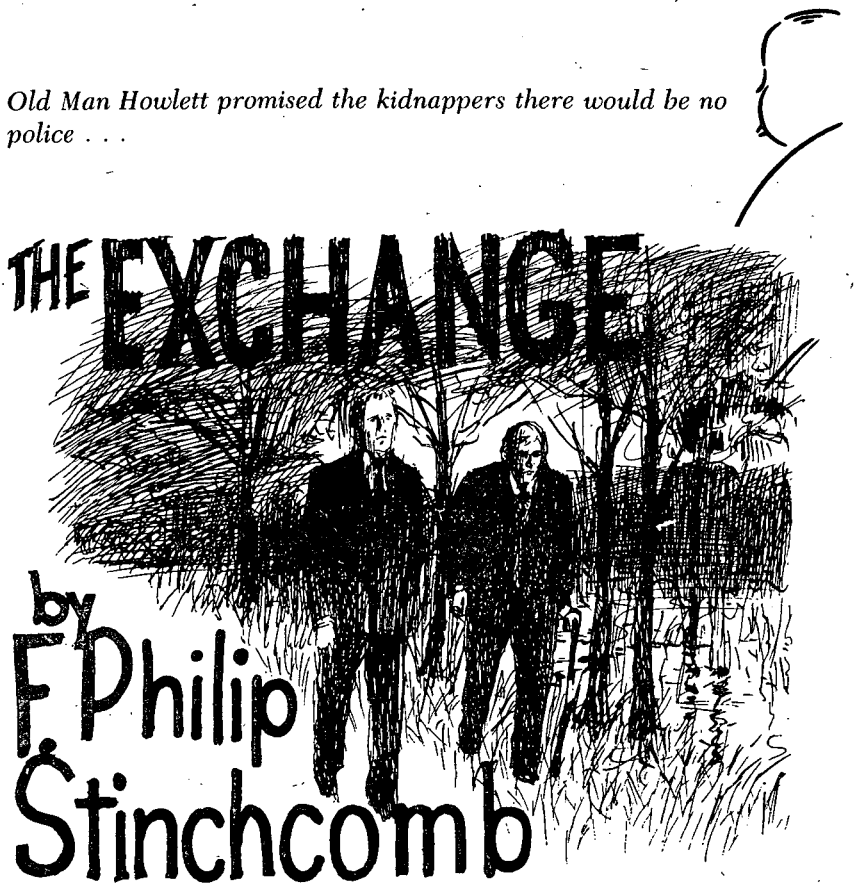
Old Man Howlett promised the kidnappers there would be no police . . .



"Bryce," I said, "I'm sorry."

What more can you say to a man when the last of his line, his twenty-five-year-old grandson, is in the hands of kidnappers demanding $500,000?

Bryce Howlett stared back at me through eyes that many people claimed could see into a man's soul and assess his sincerity. I had no qualms. I was sincere and I was sure the old man knew it. It was likely that the same expression coming from the majority of the people in

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Annemessex would have been a formality. At the same time, they would likely have been sorry for his grandson, Calvin, who was well liked.

Old Man Howlett—Mr. Bryce, to his face—was respected grudgingly. He was one of the richest men on Maryland's Eastern Shore, and everyone knew he had come from poverty. Guesses at his wealth varied from one to fifty million. As his attorney, I knew it was near to three million. If there were younger people who hadn't heard his story, the chances were good that their elders would at some time tell them what they knew of the old man's past and probably, at the same time, tell them he was tough as nails, merciless, but fair. In business he asked no quarter and gave none, and his word was absolute.

It had been near 8:00 P.M. when his housekeeper, who was also well into her seventies, ushered me into the office Bryce maintained in his home.

He got up from the old swivel chair behind the desk, shook my hand, and sat down in the fiddleback rocker, motioning me to the leather wingchair facing him.

Except for the desk and its chair, the large office—and the rest of the house—was furnished with Early American antiques or excellent reproductions. All had been selected with the good taste of Bryce's late wife, Nancy. I don't believe one piece had been relocated from the position it occupied when Nancy died twenty years ago.

Bryce reached for the cuspidor with the handle of his cane and drew it nearer to him. He took a little pocket knife from his vest and carefully sliced a sliver from a plug of chewing tobacco—one of the black, strong-looking brands. After he had it lodged to his satisfaction, he spoke.

"Well, Billy?"

"Well?" I replied.

"It takes more'n being sorry. Though I know you mean it, and I'm appreciating. But there's some deciding to do."

"Have you called the police?"

"Not yet. Course, the bastard said they were going to murder Calvin if the police interfered." There was passion in his voice, but little fear. "I said there'd be no police."

"Did they say murder?"

"Said execute." He waved a hand. "Means murder."

"You're going to pay?"

He sat for several minutes with his eyes cast down. Occasionally he

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tapped his cane as if putting a thought aside and tamping it into the floor.

He had cut the cane from a hickory branch on his own land years ago. He claimed they didn't make a commercial product as good. It was the opinion of some people that he used it because he was too stingy to spend five dollars. This despite the fact that, when the staff had split, he had shipped it to a custom canemaker to have it repaired. It had come back with a staff that appeared to be hickory, but with a brass sleeve where the new staff joined the old handle. Made it look, as Bryce said, "store-boughten."

He started to tap the floor, stopped, and looked up at me. I surmised he had an idea he thought good enough to show.

"Most of the time it doesn't make any difference. They murder 'em anyhow, don't they?"

"It's a chance," I said.

"I don't suppose you think the money would make any difference to me, do you?"

"I'm sure Calvin's life does, Bryce."

"The money isn't important, except for one thing." He pondered.

"I've dealt with men I was sure were thieves and liars," he went on, "but I was always watching them. I never paid blackmail or bribery, and I never had dealings with murderers—that I know of. And these men want me to trust them." He waved his hand to brush the idea aside. "They must think age has dulled my mind."

Bryce Howlett never talked to hear his own voice. I didn't move.

"When they called a couple of hours ago, I told them they'd have to deal with you. Feller on the phone started in to give me some lip. I said, 'Feller, you want the money or not?' He shut up. I told him if he wanted it to call you—you'd be here a while tonight, and in your office tomorrow. He said he'd call back tonight."

He stopped again, seemed to be considering something, then continued. "When they call, you tell them they got one chance to get the money. They have to let Calvin go and take me. Then, and only then, will you talk about the money."

"How are they going to—"

"That's their problem. I'll call the bank and make arrangements for you to get the money. But I want your word, Billy. Calvin's got to be alive and safe in Annemessex before you talk about it."

"Bryce, they'll kill you for sure."

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"Maybe, maybe not. I figure if they won't let Calvin go it's because he knows who they are. So they're gonna murder him anyhow. If they let him go, maybe they won't hurt me."

"It's a long chance."

He shrugged. "Billy, I'd never come as far as I did if I'd been running scared. I'm near eighty. Not much further to go."

Then his voice got hard, cold. "Blackmailers. Murderers. They're not fittin' to live amongst men."

"Not much we can do about that right now," I said.

"Maybe." He sat tapping the floor with his cane. "Maybe yes. Maybe no." He appeared to be considering something. Twice he looked at me as though to speak, then changed his mind. The third time he looked up, he spoke. "Billy, you've heard of Miss Estelle Elliot?"

"Who in Annemessex hasn't? I've heard people speak as though pedagogy died with her."

"Don't know what pedagogy is," he said. "But if it means they think she was a great teacher, I'm one of them. Course, we didn't have no school down on the Lower Neck when I was a kid. County probably thought trash like us Lower Neckers didn't need none. Maybe I was lucky we didn't have one. We had to walk seven miles here to Annemessex for schooling. If we'd had one down there, I'd never have had Miss Estelle for a teacher. I remember the last year I went to school. It was the third. During American history Miss Estelle said, 'Whatever you boys and girls want in this country you can have, if you've got the guts to pay for it.' Maybe it was a woman saying a word like 'guts' that made it stick. I don't know. But I think she believed it, and I believed her. I still do.

"Well, Mam and Pop died that year. I never went back to school. Took over Pop's trap line. I've paid my way ever since and I've got my share of what I wanted. Some say I've gotten more. Maybe they're right, but not in the way they think.

"First pack of muskrat skins I brought up here—seven miles, on my back—Jay Hawkins and his gang took away from me. I went to the constable and he asked what evidence I had. I asked him what was evidence. He laughed at me. Said Lower Neckers were all dumb. They started out dumb, as kids. My little brother died that winter—I found out later he had scurvy because I was too poor to buy potatoes. Sissy and I buried him beside Mam and Pop. We didn't have no preacher.

"The next time I brought up skins, I had Pop's old cap-and-ball horse

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pistol stuck in the pack. Jaw Hawkins tried it again, right on Main Street, with a lot of people watching. I just stuck that big pistol in his belly and pulled the trigger. One of Jay's gang came at me with a skinning knife and I killed him too.

"That constable, he wanted to have me in court for murder, but Caleb Tawes—he owned the bank—he got some of the people that was watching it all happen, and they swore I was only defending my property. Then they was going to put Sissy and me in some kind of home, but Caleb Tawes said he'd be responsible for us. He and Mrs. Tawes wanted us to move up to their house, but Sissy and I said we wouldn't take no charity. So we made a deal: Sissy helped with the housework and went to school. He had an old work boat he let me have for crabbing and oyster-tonging. I paid for it from a percentage of my catch, and paid my board too.

"Nights he talked to me about banks and using money to work for me. I learned. And what I learned I didn't forget. I didn't forget that my little brother died for want of food because Jay Hawkins robbed me either. I still remember that, and these kidnappers are Jay Hawkins all over again."

He stopped talking and sat silently for awhile. "Maybe they'll get away with it, maybe they won't." He said it quietly, as if he were talking to himself.

We waited until 1:00 A.M. for a phone call, but none came. When I was leaving, Bryce said he wouldn't answer the phone until he saw me again. He repeated that I wasn't to talk to the police until Calvin was safe. Then I could do as I wished. Perhaps he was right.

I had the feeling someone was watching me during the four-block walk to my house. But then, perhaps being involved in a kidnapping is like listening to a ghost story before walking past a cemetery after dark.

It was 9:45 the next morning when the call came. A muffled voice started giving instructions for the delivery of the money. I interrupted, stated the conditions, and listened to the threats. I displayed some courage I didn't feel and told him it was his move. My hands were shaking when I hung up the phone. He had said I wouldn't hear from him again. We might find Calvin's body someday. There was no use calling Bryce. He wouldn't answer the phone. I was afraid to leave my office—they might call back.

The next call came at 3:30 in the afternoon. It was a different

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voice—suave, cool. The exchange would be made. I was to go to Bryce's house and have him ready to leave the moment I received the next phone call. Another warning: the first sign of police intervention and it was all over for the hostage.

I hurried to Bryce's house and relayed the message. "Good," he said. "Calvin's still alive. I was afeared he wasn't."

We waited for two hours. I was too agitated to do much talking. Bryce was quiet most of the time, except he would occasionally ask me if I remembered some incident in the past. Twice he gave me minor instructions about what to do if he didn't come back. But then he would say, "Course, it's all in the letter in my safe."

Half an hour before sunset the call came. It was the same cool, impersonal voice. We were to leave the house at once and drive to the end of Old Colony Road. There was a footpath across the marsh leading to the trees bordering on Sandford Creek. Bryce was to start walking toward the trees and Calvin would be brought out. When they met on the path, Calvin's escort would go back with Bryce and Calvin would come on to the car. There would be a high-powered rifle fitted with a telescope pointing at every step—any crossup and Bryce and Calvin would both die. Did I have the money in my possession? he asked. Of course not, I said, it was in a safe—he could call with instructions any time after the exchange. "You be there," the voice said, and hung up.

Two blocks after we left the house, a police car slowly passed us. I looked over at it. Boyd Richards, who worked at the desk most of the time, was in it. He was peering into our car. I had a strong urge to wave and stop him. Bryce put his hand on my arm. Boyd waved, smiled, and speeded on, turning off at the next crossing. We went straight ahead.

The end of Old Colony Road was the end of firm land above flood tides backing up from the Pocomoke River two miles to the south. Three hundred years ago, an early settlement town had risen on Sandford Creek at the spot where the clump of pines stood as a lonely island of trees in thousands of acres of salt marshes. Now only the path led six hundred yards to the boat landing in the trees where once the town had been. Erosion and sinking land had forced abandonment of the settlement many years ago. No buildings remained; only the ghosts of early Englishmen were left in the wilderness of pines and vast salt marshes they had come so far to conquer.

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To the east the marshes extend for miles up the Pocomoke. West of the island of pines they vanish on the horizon over Lower Neck, at the edge of Tangier Sound. A man out there in one of those tall pines had a commanding view of his surroundings.

We stopped at the end of the road. The sun was almost touching the treetops. The trees were in deep shadow. I looked toward them and shivered.

Bryce sat silently staring at the trees and over the marshes.

"You know, Billy," he said, "I sorta feel like I'm coming home. Pop used to say our ancestors landed here over three hundred years ago. And I reckon ain't no man loves these salt marshes more'n a man born on the Lower Neck."

I waited. Finally he opened the car door and got out.

I followed and met him at the front of the car. I grasped his arm. "For God's sake, Bryce, be careful. Don't antagonize them. I'll get the money to them with no hitches."

"Billy," he said, "don't worry so much. You know I got better sense 'n to agitate a copperhead—unless I'm fixed to break his back."

He turned and took a couple of steps on the path, stopped, and looked back. "Billy—you—you take care now," he cautioned. Then he moved on.

I can't honestly say that Bryce and I were ever close friends. There was always a little reserve with Bryce. He was, I suppose, something of a loner all his life. But as I watched him across the path, leaning heavily on his cane with each step, the moisture came into my eyes.

At one point I was about to call to him that it was a trick—he was fifty yards down the path and I couldn't see anyone coming from behind the trees—then I saw two figures walking toward us, Calvin, blindfolded, and a man wearing a stocking mask.

It seemed to me, as they came together, that Bryce was beginning to lean more heavily on his cane. When they met and the man whipped off Calvin's blindfold, it was obvious that Calvin was arguing with his grandfather. The escort shoved Calvin in my direction and took Bryce's arm, urging him toward the trees and waving Calvin away. Calvin waited for a moment, watching Bryce's progress, then turned and trudged toward me, his head bowed.

When he reached me he was sobbing. I untied his bound hands and he wiped at the tears in his eyes.

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"Mr. Billy, they're going to kill him. I know it. He didn't even blindfold him. They're going to kill him, soon as they get the money."

"Did you see any of them?

"No. They both wore stocking masks. There's two of them."

Dusk had come on us. Though the moon was bright enough to make close objects visible, the trees across the marsh were only a black line.

"They have a boat, a fast one, there in the creek," Calvin said. "I don't have any idea where they brought me from, except that it's close to the water."

His words were punctuated by the sharp crack of a high-powered rifle. We turned and saw the flashes and heard the pistol shots back at the edge of the trees.

"My God! They've killed him!" Calvin screamed, and started running toward the trees.

"Calvin! Come back! They'll kill you too!"

He kept running. As I followed him, my reason told me the shots were not planned. If they had planned to kill Bryce they wouldn't have advertised it to us. That would stop the ransom money. Something unexpected had happened.

Panting, I slowed to a walk. Calvin reached the trees a hundred yards ahead of me. There were no more shots, no roar of a boat motor.

When I arrived at the creek, Calvin was kneeling, holding Bryce's body in his arms. There was a man on the ground near them, holding both hands to his face and howling, "The crazy old fool! He's blinded me! He's blinded me!" I could see the blood running between his fingers.

"How? How did he do it?" I asked.

He didn't answer, just kept sobbing and howling.

Then I saw the other man on the ground. Protruding two feet above his chest was the handle of the old hickory cane. The sword attached to it had gone through his heart.

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Lydia Wells-Farnham had been set up . . .

THE SOLID-GOLD LIE

by WILLIAM BANKIER

I admit I'm a liar and a cheat.

That doesn't make me a criminal. I would no more hit a drunk over the head and take his money than I'd walk on stage without knowing my lines. Yes, I'm an actor. If you attend performances at any of the fringe theaters around London—the pub circuit—you'll have seen me. My name is Cole Castleford.

My cheating helps me stay in business. Everybody knows the distri-

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bution of wealth is unfair. In any city there are people who are down to their last dollar rubbing shoulders with other people who couldn't spend all their money if they lived to be a century old. So if I can think of a way to release a couple of hundred—without breaking any laws—from somebody who has thousands, I do it. I tell myself God will punish me if He thinks I deserve it. Meanwhile, where is it written that an actor should go hungry or walk in broken shoes?

I was pushing a shopping cart through the supermarket on Haverstock Hill when I ran into Lydia Wells-Farnham. A woman in her sixties, she looked close-cropped and bright-eyed, a residual tan on those round cheeks telling me something about a fortnight spent in St. Tropez while I was trying to clear my bronchial passages in clammy London so I could address an audience and earn a quid.

"Hello!" She radiated all over me, the former Roedean girl, jolly-hockey-sticks, I'm in good health and on top of the world and isn't everybody? "How is the acting going?"

"Going well. Very well indeed." I had been a non-paying guest in the Wells-Farnham Tudor mansion fronting on Hampstead Heath when I first came down from the north ten years ago. My producer, an old friend of the family, had made the living arrangement to help me get on my feet. Lydia and her husband attended a couple of my early shows. Then I moved out and settled in my humble bed-sitter in the less fashionable end of the village.

"How are things with you?" I asked her.

"Fine, thank you. Keeping busy. It's the only way." Our eyes met and she showed me just a little of her loneliness, which was real enough. Her husband had died three years before. I knew they had been a close copule and I was convinced she wasn't the sort to have keened or wailed or rent her garments. Where was the logic in such behavior? An emotional collapse wouldn't bring her husband back. What her expensive education had not taught her was the truth taken for granted in other cultures, the awareness that you can't swallow grief. If you do, you carry it like a stone for the rest of your life. Weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth are as essential as laughter.

"Are you busy too?" she inquired.

"More than ever. When one part ends, I move right into another."

"How marvelous. I always knew you'd do famously."

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It must have been at that moment that I decided to winkle some money out of Lydia Wells-Farnham, if I could. I had no plan in mind. I simply resolved to abandon my artificial posture of well-being. "How famously I'm doing is a matter of interpretation," I said, changing positions so that the pitiful display in my cart—spaghetti package, one small tin of sauce, three apples in a bag—was no longer hidden. "Artistically, I'm on the crest of a wave. I work regularly and the reviews are good. Trouble is, I'm being paid a pittance."

"Oh, dear."

"It's my own fault. Nobody forces me to be an actor. I could increase my income by becoming a postman." I let my eyes connect with hers for a fraction of a second, permitting her a glimpse inside a personal reality as frightening as her own. Then I put on a brave smile and surprised myself by adding, "If it were only me, I might be able to handle it. But as it is—"

She accepted my cue and fed me the required line. "Is there somebody else?"

"My young brother up north. He needs an operation but the National Health Service is not as efficient up there as it is here." The story poured out of me with the effortless credibility of a solid-gold lie. "They've put him on a waiting list, but that may take a year. He could have the operation done privately, but the money for a thing like that—"

"Oh, I know," Lydia said.

I almost laughed out loud. Oh, I know. It's a common phrase among the courteous English. The words go up and down musically and they have a sort of Sunday School sincerity about them, pure and straight-faced and childlike, even when spoken—as frequently they are—by people in their fifties.

What the phrase means is this: Please don't go on about your problem because I don't want to know.

The idea percolated in my mind over the weekend. By Monday I knew what I was going to do. Although she was not aware of it, Lydia Wells-Farnham had been set up. It only remained for me to give her another push.

I did this by writing her a personal letter.

"Dear Lydia," I wrote, "somebody is an angel in disguise. I'm not sure who it is, but I think it must be you. The postal money order for £200

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arrived today, and although it carries no identification of the sender I have a feeling it must come from you.

"To be sure, I did mention my brother's predicament to a couple of other people recently, so my anonymous benefactor might be one of them. However, there is a sweetness and generosity about the act that leads me to see your gracious hand behind it.

"My brother is not out of the woods, I'm afraid. His operation will cost £500. Nothing can happen until that sum is realized. So, in a sense, the problem remains. But your thoughtfulness has done wonders for my morale. The other £300 will come from somewhere.

"Meanwhile, my faith in human nature has been restored by this unselfish act of yours. Or could it have been someone else? God bless whoever it was.

"Sincerely, Cole Castleford."

It almost embarrasses me to report how promptly the lady rose to the surface and leaped into my boat like a fat salmon. Her letter arrived three days later—a short note, enclosing a check for £300. "Dear Cole, Your letter touched me very much. At the same time it made me feel ashamed. The problem about your brother did not register with me strongly enough in the first instance to make me act. I'm afraid I am a selfish woman. My mind is occupied most of the time with my own problems. Are we not, all of us, something like that?

"Apparently not all. Your original benefactor—whoever he or she is—behaved in a way to provide an example. Enclosed is the amount you mentioned which will see your brother quickly into the medical care he needs. I hope all goes well.

"I admire you, Cole, for your frankness, your ability to be open and honest with your friends. From now on, I shall try to think a little less of my own worries and more about those of other people.

"Sincerely, Lydia. P.S. It does not surprise me that a man like you has more than one friend ready to come forward and help him. Could the other one also be a woman? L."

So there I was, three hundred to the good. The money eased my financial strain for the immediate future. Of course I responded to Lydia, by telephone this time, thanking her and explaining that my brother's operation would be laid on soon. I knew I'd have to report success in a few weeks' time— Or would death on the operating table be more productive? Such a tragedy would require a quick trip north, money for

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traveling expenses, money to settle unexpected debts uncovered at home, money for the funeral. I would have to consider the possibilities.

What happened next was totally unexpected. I'm still trying to decide whether I've been struck by good fortune or by lightning. BBC Television has made arrangements to film the play I'm doing at the Blue Boar Pub. As the male lead, I'm scheduled to be interviewed by a reporter from their weekly magazine. Since the play has a north-of-England setting, the reporter wants to do the interview and take some photographs of me in my home setting.

How can I avoid admitting to the reporter that I'm an only child? Anything else will not go down with my parents and the residents of my home town. But Lydia is bound to see the magazine and will discover I have no brother, in hospital or anywhere else.

Of course, now that I've spent the money she gave me, why should I care what a sentimental middle-aged widow thinks of me?

Eight weeks have passed. The television film has been made, the interview has taken place in my northern home with my mother speaking proudly of her only son. It will appear in print early next month. I decided to tell Lydia that my brother's operation was a success. She invited me to dinner at the Tudor mansion—I'm afraid she likes my company.

Her big news at table was that she has bought the Blue Boar Pub. My leading roles, she implies, are guaranteed forever, and there should be no ceiling on my wages.

I said before that God will punish me if He thinks I deserve it. Once that article appears, I'll be free to choose my own sentence. Either I can abandon my lucrative job at the pub and seek work elsewhere or I can concentrate on persuading Lydia Wells-Farnham to forgive me. And for all this heartache, I received only £300.

Where is the justice?

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Aoi had never known a time of such confusion and unrest . . .

THE GIRL FROM ISHIKAWA

by ANN F. WOODWARD

In the pale light of early dawn the palace was dim and quiet. The Lady Aoi passed slowly over the smooth boards of the passageway on her way back to her own room after a night spent trying to ease the Empress's pains of age. Her own pains were lessened by the exercise of massaging and manipulating the limbs of her old friend. As she came into the main hall, she was surprised to see that the doors were open. The soft, glowing aspect of the courtyard arrested her steps. Fine rain beaded every leaf

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and diffused the light, making the outlines of walls and trees and sand go soft as those of a painting done with quick washes of a wet brush.

Struck by this eerie beauty and spent from the long night, she sank to the floor, well in the shadows along the back wall, and bemoaned this love of beauty of hers that kept her tied to the world each time she tried to leave it and retire to a temple for the good of her soul. In her robes of brown and grey she might have been a denser shadow except for the occasional flick of a fan held automatically before her face, even in such solitude.

There was movement outside the door, just beyond her line of vision, but so discreet it was some while before she noticed it. A sudden shift of ox hoof and creak of axle stilled her fan. Against the luminous light of the doorway, colored silk flashed and retreated, then swirled into view on the boards of the veranda and resolved into a woman's figure, closely followed by two others.

In the next moment Aoi understood. It was the Prince, and he was bringing the girl after all. Rumors about her had been the chief interest at court for months now, ever since his return from exile.

The girl stood for a moment, as if still bent from sitting in the carriage, then she straightened and turned to face the courtyard, dropping her fan with a clatter, raising her head from its graceful droop, and looking swiftly and carefully at her new surroundings. There was a gasp from the serving woman, who ducked after the fan and in her haste knocked it off the edge and into the sand.

The Prince moved to the girl's side and held the long edge of her sleeve to hide her face. At once she turned, her posture softened, and she swayed toward his protective arm. He led her off into the shadows of the long corridor of the west wing, the girl gliding along with a palace walk, her hair trailing the floor behind her, a black river against the lustrous silks she wore. Aoi knew she had not been seen and, after the men had closed the doors and left, she rose and passed again into the shadows.

The news was out by the time her morning meal was brought. A young serving girl knocked and slid back the door.

"By your leave, my lady, just a little something."

She set the small table with its short legs on the mat with a bump and Aoi feared for the soup.

"They're busy in the west wing this morning and some of us have to

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go and help," the servant explained. "They have a new lady over there."

Aoi's silencing glance passed over her head and the girl prattled on. "The Prince himself is there, sitting beside her curtains, sending for all sorts of special food and ordering more screens to be put up on the garden side. As if we hadn't been doing that room over for the last month! He won't let any of us see her, but I heard her speak to him and her voice—"

This time the glance stopped her and she bowed and moved to the door. Just before closing it, she leaned inside. "The Princess has a headache and asks if you will come to her."

The servant's last bow did not quite hide her smile.

The rainy season ended, and during the brief spell of fine warmth and sunshine before the heat of July began the morning glories in Aoi's courtyard opened and displayed their intense blue along one whole wall, where they climbed and ran in rapid growth. Aoi gave herself up to the wonder of the blossoms at their beginning, spending long hours in writing practice until the poems, old ones and new ones, lay scattered all around her.

Blue you are and tender,
But how strongly you grip the wall!
My heart too is held by this blue.

It opens to the morning,
This cup of blue.
How will it ever hold the dew
That comes with evening?

Her mind ran along familiar tracks into the past and she begrudged any time spent away from her own room. But she was often called to the Princess, whose headaches required Aoi's soothing fingers.

"My lady, why don't you go to the mountains for a while? It is cool there and life is simple," Aoi said to her.

"No. I am quite comfortable here." The Princess sat cold and still, her face smooth except for a small line between the eyes, drawn by the headache. She was practicing calligraphy, seated before her writing box. It was a special box, sent to her by the Prince during his exile.

In a year of unrest, when he had seemed to threaten his father's reign, he had retreated to a rough coastal area. There he lived with a small

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company in attendance for three years while his wife fretted with worry in the capital. At first there had been frequent messengers with letters and poems about rain and tears. Gradually the messengers had become less numerous on the road from the sea village beside the rocky river where he was waiting out his father's displeasure. The Princess had kept her smooth face, but a stillness had come into her figure so that when she saw her Aoi had felt that even the folds of her robe lay just so, under tight control.

There had come a day in winter when the Princess sat with Aoi and her other ladies about the charcoal brazier. The cold was such that they were wearing layer after layer of robes, not caring about the set of them but pulling them close and warming their hands inside their sleeves. Only the Princess sat sewing as usual, making a warm vest for her husband, while the rest talked in apathetic gloom.

Footsteps in the hall brought them all upright, and before they could adjust their curtain fully a maid opened the door to announce a messenger from the Prince. He came striding in with a stirring of cold air about him and they could see through the cracks in the curtains that stood between them and him that he had come straight to the Princess without stopping to change his clothes or warm himself. Behind him was another man bearing a large straw-wrapped box.

"I have the honor to bring you good news from my lord the Prince. He bids me inform you that his honored father has written that he has discovered that indeed my lord had nothing to do with the incident that so displeased him, and that he is requested to return to the capital. My lord asks me to say to you that he will be with you before the violets bloom." His face remained stiff as he made this reference to an old poem.

The Princess sat quietly amid her ladies' exclamations. Aoi observed that her hands dropped their sewing and sought the warmth of her sleeves. A rising flush was checked before it reached her cheeks. Even her blood obeys her will, Aoi thought.

The Princess murmured some words of concern for the messengers' comfort, but the man turned to his companion and motioned to him to unwrap the box. When it was set before her in its covering of brocade, the Princess untied the cords with steady fingers and the cloth fell away to reveal a writing box of fine-grained dark wood, the top decorated with a design of sea grass etched in gold. Inside, every use imaginable had been made of sea shells.

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A pair of dark razor-clam shells, cleverly hinged, held sticks of black ink, and a fat whorl had been partially sealed to make a water dropper; for mixing, there was an elongated curve of pale tan set into the inkstone, and a pointed twist protected the tip of a slender brush. All were rimmed and reinforced with gold in a way so novel and imaginative that the ladies' voices were hushed at this exquisite work of some unknown craftsman of the shore. This time the blush would not obey the Princess and she lowered her head to hide it.

Once away from the Princess's presence, the ladies' comments were as sharp as they had been for the last several months.

"So he's coming home, is he? Too bad for that one there by the shore!"

"Yes, I wonder how many messengers he'll keep busy going the other way, once he's back."

"She's never said a word, has she? But a writing box—even one so fine as that—won't make her forget all those months of waiting for letters."

"Surely someone is keeping him company there! Though how he could find anyone to interest him in that wild place—"

"Our lady is so beautiful he'll never think of that other one once he's back."

Now the Princess sat before the writing box and twirled the sharp tapered shell between her fingers, not writing, the tiny line set between her brows. Aoi persuaded her to lie down and submit to a gentle massage.

The Princess was protected by her ladies from the gossip and stories about the Ishikawa girl. She accepted calmly all the Prince's excuses for his absences and no one dared criticize him in her presence. Yet incidents concerning the girl completely absorbed the court.

Her ladies were all women of beauty and taste, carefully chosen by the Prince himself to help her in her adjustment to the royal lifestyle. Soon these same ladies were seen in the palace halls wearing robes of a novel dyed pattern learned from their mistress. The secret was enticed away from them and the fashion spread.

Notes from her were left casually lying about by their recipients so that callers might admire her handwriting and her skill at poetry. Though the Prince kept her carefully hidden behind the thickest curtains, many visitors were received in her rooms and word of her beauty was spread even by those who had only glimpsed her sleeve. At night there were so many courtiers in that part of the palace that it almost amounted to a parade

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of finely dressed gentlemen looking for a chance to slip a note beneath her curtains or to spy the hem of her robe under her blinds.

Aoi kept aloof from all this. Gossip and speculation were not what kept her in this palace when her spirit yearned for the peace of a mountain temple. She saw to the tending of her morning glories, sat with the Empress playing the koto through the long warm nights when the moon was full, or chose the finest paper on which to write a poem for the Princess celebrating the pleasures of high summer.

A note from the girl herself destroyed this detachment. It was brought by a pretty little serving girl wearing a thin robe dyed in the new way. The paper was light green, folded into a narrow strip, and tied with a few long stems of fresh grass. The handwriting showed originality and an almost masculine strength.

The sea-bird has left the shore
And sails among the clouds,
How bright the stars!
But one has not yet shown itself.
I have heard of your many skills and I long to meet you.

Aoi went the next day in the early morning. Chiding herself for her pleasure in the day and in the light smooth flow of silk along her skin as she passed through patches of sun on the gallery floor, she arrived at the girl's apartment and was taken at once to her curtains. Speaking in a low voice, the girl ordered refreshments and another cushion brought for her guest, then dismissed the serving women and at once threw up the gauzy cloth that hung between them and set the curtain frame aside.

"It is best that there be nothing between us from the beginning," she said. "From what I have heard of you, I am sure we will become friends."

Then, as on that first morning when Aoi had observed her unseen from the shadows, her posture changed from soft meekness to a straight-gazing directness. She smiled and invited Aoi to move her cushion closer.

For an agreeable hour they spoke of superficial things. Finally the girl said, "I must admit, Lady, that I have a special request to make of you."

Aoi was not surprised. Her knowledge of medicines and cures was well known and she often found that conversations took this particular turn. But what followed was not what she expected.

"I have some learning in Chinese but my scrolls were all left behind

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when I came here. I wonder if it is true, as they say, that you too read Chinese?"

The spiteful comment that Aoi gave herself airs with her Chinese letters had followed her all her life, though her reading in that language was done in secret. She was not one to drop poems about that looked as if they had been done by a man, though her education had taken a masculine turn when her father, finding himself with no sons, had allowed her to persuade him to teach her. It was because of this skill and a collection of scrolls of many sorts that she had learned of herbs and proper massage for the relief of pain. How in the world had a girl from that wild region of the coast come to have Chinese learning? She asked the question, in spite of herself.

"After my father's death, my mother continued to resent the injustice done him when he was exiled. She refused to return to the capital, though her family urged her to do it for my sake. She determined to give me a complete education and bring me here when I was old enough to marry. She was very strict with me and kept me well hidden from the villagers and the priests of the temple, which stood across the river from our house. But my father's disgrace and death had been almost more than she could bear and she became fond of wine in the evenings. For years she left her bed very late in the mornings and she never knew that I often ran across the stones of the river at dawn to meet an old priest who taught me secretly."

"How could he dare to do it?"

"He was a very learned man, and you know how they are there in the country so far from civilization. The local boys came reluctantly to their lessons and the novices had no aptitude. I liked to copy the Chinese letters and when he found that I learned them quickly he could not help himself. So he taught me to read the poems of Po Chu-i and eventually the sutras.

"A few years ago, the maid became alarmed because I was growing up and said she would tell my mother if I went any more." She was quiet for a while. "The Prince is not with me so often now, and I have little to do. I would so like to study again if *you* would teach me."

Like the priest, Aoi could not help herself. After that day she went regularly to visit, concealing a scroll in the fullness of her clothing. The girl had a quick memory and a speculative mind. At times when Aoi arrived she was greeted with a repressed enthusiasm that was almost

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feverish, and she soon found that she had forged a new link with the world, stronger than any of the others.

As the summer progressed the heat and humidity increased. Tempers became rough as people faced days of windless heat after sleepless nights. In the city there were frequent incidents of violence involving the militant monks of the surrounding mountains, who came down to protest recent cuts in their land allotments. They were dressed in straw sandals and ragged brown robes, wild in appearance and well armed. The men of the government became alarmed after some were attacked as they passed through the city in their elaborate carriages.

In the palace, the women persistently reported seeing a fox spirit about at night, a white wraith that drifted through the halls and sent them screaming. Only Aoi slept alone. The rest sought company for safety, lest the spirit enter their bodies in a moment of unwariness.

They wore themselves out with watchfulness. The Empress chided them for their hysteria. The Princess stilled their high-pitched speculations with a cold look, but she herself was so pale and exhausted she avoided company as much as possible. Violent storms wracked the night, bringing only brief refreshment.

The trouble with the priests became so insistent that a special council was held. It was decided to send to the east for help, and the strongest lord of the warlike eastern clans sent troops, with his son to command them.

They entered the city's broad central avenue late in the afternoon and the carriages of the nobles lined the way, along with the townsmen on foot. The Prince gave a banquet in the evening to welcome the lord's son and his officers. The palace was alight well into the night as they sat drinking.

Suddenly lightning flashed and the wind sent curtains and blinds standing out into the room. The storm struck almost before the men could heave themselves to their feet or the servants rescue the furnishings and lanterns. There was one fire, hastily doused with a wet curtain, and the rest of the lights were extinguished, leaving the Prince and his guests stumbling about in confusion, orienting themselves by the lightning flashes, struggling along with the servants to close the rain doors against the wind.

In the end, the Prince and his courtiers retreated before the practical

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vigor of the warriors from the east, who, though they were as drunk as the rest, soon had the doors secure.

But that was no sooner accomplished when several women ran in, crying that a tree had fallen through the roof in the west wing. The eastern men surged off after them to help. The damage was in the Ishikawa girl's apartment. Aoi arrived in the doorway just behind the eastern lord's son. He stood facing the girl. The lightning was almost continuous. Quickly she raised her sleeve to hide her face, but before lowering her head to slip past him and join Aoi her gaze met his. The lord's son stood wiping the rain from his face, and with it all his drunkenness.

The next day the soldiers began their forays into the mountains to chastise the monks. They went in small groups, each with a commander, and returned after a night or two to rest before going out again. The heat and the storms continued. Workmen began to repair the girl's rooms and the Prince, hardly able to take her into his own quarters near his wife, asked his mother to look after her. He himself was busy night and day, directing the campaign against the monasteries, keeping himself accessible to the commanders, carousing into the night with those who had just returned. But the Empress became ill with a fever and the Princess lay mysteriously spent and listless, hardly eating at all. The fox spirit continued to frighten the women. Aoi had never known such a time of confusion and unrest. Caring for both the Empress and the Princess, she was often up through the night.

After one of these nights, it was barely dawn when she left the Empress asleep at last and Aoi decided to go into the garden to enjoy its coolness before returning to her room for a few minutes' rest before the day began. She found a large level stone by the lake's edge and sat in the stillness, letting her worries float off and away in momentary abandonment to beauty.

As she turned to go, she raised her eyes to the palace behind her.

They sat together facing the dawn, the girl and the son of the eastern lord. She wore only a loose robe of apricot beaten silk which was open to the waist, he a white loincloth. As Aoi watched, he turned to the girl, leaned forward to grasp her shoulders briefly, stood to tie on his clothes, and left. The girl lowered the blinds, her figure melting into the shadows of the room.

Aoi felt a stirring in her breast that was the beginning of tears. As she

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walked the long corridors back to her room, she found herself battling to subdue memories aroused by the emotion she had sensed between those two as they watched the dawn. Ah, these pains of love that she thought she had left behind! Her feelings for her husband and her desolation at his early death sprang strong and fresh within her, sweeping away the calm that had become her weapon against them. She stopped to steady her breathing and clear her eyesight, standing hunched and grey in the dim hall.

A brushing on the floorboards behind her brought her erect and she turned to see who it was at this early hour. The Princess advanced slowly toward her, holding one hand against the wall as if to guide her steps. Aoi bowed low and breathed a greeting, looking sideways at the pale-robed shadow, so curiously stiff and silent, but the Princess passed her without speaking, her sleeve falling over Aoi's head and dropping away as she went. She seemed not to know Aoi was there and kept on her way until she reached her own doorway, where she vanished into the gloom. Aoi noticed only that the Princess had come from the direction of the Empress's quarters before she bowed to the grief of awakened longings and fled to her own privacy.

Three days later, the eastern men left at first light to begin the long march back to their province. Soon afterward the cries of women came from two parts of the palace—the halls filled with maids and hastily dressed ladies-in-waiting. Urgent requests for Aoi were passed from the Princess's women and those of the Empress too. Aoi went first to the Princess, who was nearer.

She found her writhing on her bed, speaking in a rapid babble no one could understand. Her ladies said she had awakened them just after dawn with her ravings. It was the fox spirit, they said, who had entered her and was speaking with the voice of one dead. Aoi sent a maid to her room for her box of medicines and powders.

Meantime, from the Empress's wing, it was reported that a maid had been found dead in the bed of the Ishikawa girl. The girl herself was gone.

The Prince arrived, pulling his clothes together. He knelt to look at his wife, who could not be quieted, and, shouting for his men, left to investigate the death in the other wing. Priests and a medium were sent for to begin spells to identify and placate the spirit inhabiting the Prin-

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cess's body. Aoi mixed a powder to be given her when she could be calmed enough to drink it. Then she set out for the Empress's wing, holding her arms tightly to her waist to still the shivering inside.

The Prince was with his mother. Aoi could hear his angry questions and her weeping replies. The dead girl lay on her back on fine sleeping mats. She was a plain serving maid, dressed in a delicate sleeping robe that had belonged to her mistress. She appeared unmarked, but examination revealed a small, almost bloodless hole in her breast. Something had pierced her heart. The Ishikawa girl was gone without a trace—no letter, no disturbance of the room, no missing articles gave a clue as to how or why she was gone. Her women reported that they had seen her retire and that they had heard nothing alarming during the night from their adjoining room. There was no evidence of a weapon.

Aoi looked carefully at the wound, then went to the Empress to calm her and to entreat her son to let her rest. As she sat dampening the Empress's temples a fresh breeze from the garden ruffled the hangings and lifted the blinds. Rain splashed the leaves outside and coolness rose from the ground.

After it was all over—after the Prince admitted to himself that the girl from Ishikawa had gone east with the soldiers, after the evil spirit was exorcised from his wife and she returned to herself, after the long summer of disturbances had been compacted into tales and memories—Aoi often found the Prince seeking her out. They spoke of the girl as of one who had died, but the question remained in his eyes for her to read. *Why? Why* had she left? Any woman in the empire would have given half her life to be in her place. What could she have wanted that she did not have?

The question was never asked and so it could not be answered. But Aoi told him a story:

"My lord, you know that I saw her often. We had a special bond. She told me something once that I thought strange.

"As you know, she went in a carriage with the other ladies to see the troops arrive. It was the first time she had left the palace since she came, but she said she saw nothing on the way but the ground. The dust, the litter, the stones of the road drew her eyes and she looked from them to her elegantly clad feet that knew only the polished floors of the palace and she tried to lower her foot to the ground, with a longing to get herself

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dirty and feel the roughness underfoot. But the other ladies noticed her movement and so she withdrew her foot and remained still.

"When the men came into the city, hot and dusty, their horses sweating, riding in an aura of mixed, sensual sounds and smells, she said she felt that for the first time in her life she was experiencing something real."

Aoi paused, studying the Prince's face. "It must seem strange that I should tell you this small thing that has no meaning. But I am just an old woman and I have thought of it often since she left. It wasn't that she wanted *more* than she had here perhaps—just something different."

The Prince's face showed no enlightenment. Aoi seemed to change the subject.

"Those people in the eastern provinces! They say they are hardly safe from month to month, there is so much unrest on the frontier—the men are always ready to ride out and even the women must carry the short sword. Can it be true, do you think?"

The Prince motioned impatiently and rose to go. Aoi's speech trailed off into numerous graceful syllables of honorifics as she bad him goodbye.

The death of the serving girl was never solved. Aoi made sure it would not be. She sent a trusted man to the coast to find the craftsman of seashells and gold. When he returned he bore a replica of the slim pointed shell that had protected the Princess's writing brush. Aoi found it easy to put the new one in the special writing box.

After that hot summer, the fox spirit was not seen again in the nighttime halls. Aoi was grateful for the terror of ghosts that had sent the others running with glazed eyes. It seemed that only she had seen that pale wraith as a human figure.

Though it sails round and whole in the sky
The moon is torn to bits
On the wind-ripped lake.
I too show a smooth round face.

The poem seemed to float from the brush onto the paper as Aoi sat thinking. She did not know if it was for the Princess or the girl, or perhaps for herself. But she tore it up at once.

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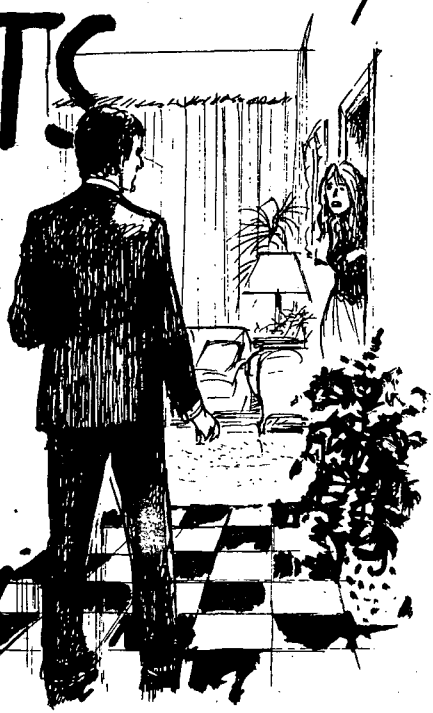
There were not only too many suspects, but too many detectives . . .

SUSPECTS TIME, CHICK!

by S. S. RAFFERTY



I don't know what you're usually doing at two o'clock in the afternoon, but yours truly, Chick Kelly, is copping zzz's. Not nap zzz's or on-the-nod zzz's, but real, honest-to-goodness, lay-me-down-and-go-to-sleep-I've-worked-hard-all-night zzz's. I am in the arms of Morpheus instead of some dishy blonde because I'm being worked to death by Barry Kantrowitz, my so-called buddy, present partner in the joint we own on Third Avenue, and ex-agent from when I was on the road doing stand-up.

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In the five years we've owned the cabaret, I only did the ten, midnight, and two A.M. (weekends only) shows. Then Barry, the Bronx's gift to dumb ideas, dreams up a nightly three o'clock set, which I warily agree to. That's a very large mistake on my part because then he also wants me to tummel the lunch crowd every day. Next, he'll promise to cover the galley slaves' oars with velvet. I tell him to go scratch.

So there I am, copping zzz's, being chased around a woodland glade by five of the greatest-looking broads ever to get top billing in my dreams, when something goes off in the outside world. Like ten on the Richter scale. Suddenly my woodland glade is my bedroom, and the phone is whacking away at my ears.

"Harwoe." Sorry, but that's the best I could muster.

"Shick?" The voice sounded sleepier and dumber than mine. "Shick—this is—Cassy. *Sh-ick!*"

"Cassy, what's wrong?" I was sitting up now, alert but a little apprehensive. "Cassy, talk. Where are you, baby?"

"Sh-ick—need you." The voice was getting teary and schizzy. "Penhouse A."

"Penthouse A *where*, Cassy? The address, baby, the address! Think!" She was either drunk, stoned, or tuning out for good, so I shouted to keep her attention. "Talk! *Cassy!* Where are you? The address, Cassy!" That was stupid; she hardly knew her own name. "Look at the phone, Cassy. Give me the number on it, baby. Just read the numbers slowly, one at a time."

She did, but I could sense across that phone wire that it took every ounce of concentration she had left in her and I hoped to hell she had it right and that it wasn't unlisted.

Maybe I shouldn't tell you how to check a phone number against the address and name of the subscriber, but if you know what a Crossdex is, and you know a reporter, you can do it.

"It's Alec Soffian's number, Parnassus Towers," Joe Menkler, a reporter I know, told me after ruffling some pages. "Why the hell do you need to check his number for, Chick? I thought he was your A and R."

"He used to be. I bombed in comedy records, remember? Thanks, Joe."

"Hold it, Chick. What's going down? A little tiff?"

"No tiff. Thanks again, Joe." I hung up and dialed the club, hoping to get Ling, my maitre d', but it was after two and Barry answered. Ling

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plays cards from two to five at Rico's. "Well, Sleeping Beauty arises!" my fat partner said sarcastically. "Did someone give you a kiss?"

"Only a hoople would give me an opening like that, Barry, but I haven't got time for zaps. Get hold of Mario and tell him to bring the limo around to my place."

"You're not in trouble, Chick?"

"No, and stop playing daddy. Tell Mario ten minutes in front of the building—and don't you come with him."

I hung up and started putting on clothes. Not casual clothes, though, because I had to get by the security desk at Parnassus Towers, which is the toughest in town, and with good reason. Every sheik with an oil well pitches his tent there, along with some rich Greeks and a few deposed South Americans. I went British—severe Savile Row double-breasted pinstripe.

But the dressing was done automatically while the brain was working on other things. First, what was Cassy Springwater's problem? I said she sounded drunk or stoned, but that couldn't be. In the three years I'd known her the only chemical that ever got near her body was an occasional lipstick.

I had given the little blonde from Tennessee her first professional gig in New York (that took courage, pal—Country & Western at my joint). Now she was what the record business calls a crossover artist. She had moved out of the hillbilly stuff into rock, and busted the charts with several packages under Alec Soffian's tutelage. Soffian has become the hottest A and R in the business. (That's Artist and Repertory in record lingo, but it doesn't say much. Actually, A and Rs are a mixture of the old-time movie producer with a touch of God Almighty tossed in.)

While I'm tying my cravat (I did say British, folks), I felt myself wishing Soffian had been a little hotter four years ago when he produced my bomb album. Back then he was just an electronic-engineering type cutting his teeth on the entertainment side of the biz. Barry blames Soffian's inexperience with the distributors; I blame the material, which I wrote myself. Like any good wheeler-dealer, Soffian is above thinking about blame.

I adjusted my braces, put on my jacket, and was off to rescue the damsel, hoping there wasn't a dragon or two out there. (Right now you're saying, "The slob didn't shave," and that's very observant of you. But don't you know all we toffs shave in our limos?)

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Well, limos and Savile Row togs weren't making a dent in the Parnassus Towers security desk (maybe I shouldn't have shaved, and should have worn a burnoose). The guy in the blazer, complete with bulge at the hip, said I wasn't listed in the Expected Visitors log and that he'd have to call up. He did and was about to give up when he finally got an answer.

"Mr. Kelly is in the lobby," he said, a suspicious look crossing his face. "May I ask who this is? Oh. Yes, ma'am, I'll send him up."

To me, still with the puzzled look, "O.K., Mr. Kelly. Elevator four, please."

I hit Soffian's door buzzer five times, then I tried the door, found it open, and went in. Four years ago, Alec Soffian was living in a modest studio apartment done in struggling Kemtone browns and Azuma appointments. Now he was living in jackpot white. What wasn't recently upholstered in Italy was hand-turned two hundred years ago by some French craftsman. It was an ice-cream Camelot and yet somehow its gloss smacked of Upper East Side brothel.

I was halfway across the foyer's black-and-white checkerboard marble tiles when Cassy came out of a side doorway. She looked like a haunted child. The pupils of her eyes were as wide as black dimes, accenting a vapid expression of deadness. Only her shoulders showed some life, but there was little comfort in their motion. They were hunching inward as if she were cowering from demons. Cassy Springwater was one perfect example of someone coming down from a bummer acid trip. It was hell to look at, but I could only imagine what she felt like.

When I took her hands in mine, she gripped them like a life preserver and squeezed.

"Easy, Cassy. It's all right, baby. Where's Alec?"

Her dead-ahead stare kept its fixed direction and she had to swivel her head to look at me. "Office," she said. At least she had stopped slurring her speech. Her head swiveled back and it was seconds before I realized she was looking at a door in the opposite wall.

"Stay here, Cassy," I ordered her, freeing my hands from her tense clutch. "Don't move an inch."

Believe me, I opened that door with trepidation. If Alec Soffian had OD'd, it would be very messy with the press.

The "office," as Cassy had called it, was actually a large library, but with record albums lining the walls instead of books. One entire wall was

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an electronic marvel, with speakers, turntables, reel-to-reel stuff—a $100,000 rig.

Its owner was at the desk, his head and shoulders down on the blotter. He was on a trip, all right—the big trip—and he hadn't OD'd. His ticket to the big sound studio in the sky was a dagger, probably a letter opener, that had been punched into his back.

I touched nothing, went back out to the foyer, and led Cassy into a side room, a sitting room that held its own in the gloss department. I'll spare you the blow-by-blow account of how I got the information out of Cassy—not that you wouldn't learn something about what LSD can do to your head, but why put you through the torturous process?

Summation: Alec and Cassy had left a late recording session around ten-thirty the night before and come straight to the apartment. No, she wasn't bunking over but around eleven o'clock she started to "feel funny" and must have fallen asleep, during which time she had terrible nightmares. When she woke up she found Alec's body, did a panic, and called me, which still surprises me. O.K., I know her pretty well, but we aren't really kissing cousins or even buddies. I guess I bring out a need for protection in some women, or have an easily remembered phone number.

I asked her why she didn't try to get the hell out of there.

"Oh, Chick, I wanted to get out of here, run away and hide, but the elevator wasn't working. I pressed the button again and again but nothing happened."

"Did you do it, Cassy?"

"Do what?"

I cocked my head back toward the office.

"Chick!" Her voice was shrill. "I couldn't have done that—I *couldn't!*"

"How do you know, Cassy? Think! Did Alec make a play for you?"

All I got was that blank stare. "I was raised a Baptist, Chick. Morality is a part of my nature."

I'm thinking that would be a unique defense in a courtroom. And while I'm thinking about courtrooms I think about the police. Here I am sitting smack in the center of a murder, and not reporting it makes me guilty of misprision or an after-the-fact accessory, maybe even a suspect. But somehow I couldn't turn Cassy in—at least not then and there. Hell, even if she did do it, it was manslaughter, and Soffian, by slipping her the acid, had brought it on himself. Sure I'm playing God (like you never did, huh?) but I'm also well aware of what overzealous cops and DAs

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could do with the situation. What Cassy needed was a lawyer. I had to get her out of there.

I asked her where the elevator was and she told me. It was a hundred-to-one shot that she'd been so zonked out earlier that she couldn't press the button properly. I got a hundred-to-one payoff. The elevator worked. I found a phone in the butler's pantry next to the elevator and dialed (actually, I punched the number buttons, but then I still call a refrigerator an icebox).

Mario answered the phone in the limo.

"Mario? Chick. I don't know how you're going to do it, but swing the limo into the garage. Tell them you have to pick up a package or something."

"I don't have to, Chick. I got clients in this building, the day guards know me."

"Swell. Penthouse A, and hurry."

I hung up and was about to get Cassy ready for travel when I noticed white grains on the countertop next to a tiny rinse sink. It didn't look like LSD, which comes in tablets, or coke, which is usually a fine powder, but I wasn't sure. Then I suddenly get very smart. Maybe the stuff *is* LSD or some other drug, so I should leave it there for the cops to find in case they nab Cassy and she needs the drugged-by-lecher defense. For the hell of it, though, I scraped a little of it onto a piece of paper from the memo pad by the phone and stuck it in my pocket, leaving the rest behind for the law.

I gathered up Cassy's handbag and brought her to the elevator. The doors opened, revealing Mario's green-eyed Sicilian face.

"What's the action, Chick? She loaded?"

"She's coming down off a trip. Look, Mario, I've got to level with you. There's a dead man in the library, and we could be in for some heat."

"So what's new?"

"Good buddy. O.K. Take her down and hide her someplace for a while. I hope she got in here last night without being seen."

"If she came through the garage at night, she probably wasn't. It's locked after ten o'clock. The tenants have an electronic key-type gimmick to get in. Hey, aren't you coming?"

"I came in through the lobby, so I'd better go out that way. Move, Mario. Take care, Cassy. Where are you going to stash her?"

"I'll take her to Annie's."

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Annie Longo is Mario's mistress. I knew she could be trusted.

The elevator doors closed and I started to make tracks out of the joint. Started was as far as I got. When I got to the foyer I was greeted by the blazer from the security desk, a couple of burly cohorts, and a guy in a white suit.

Bad enough I had to get up at two in the afternoon to play knight equerry, but it looked like I was going to spend the night listening to inquiries from Lieutenant Donald Jaffee of Homicide. I don't like him; he doesn't like me. We're even in the mutual-dislike department, but he's way ahead of me on harassment. It seems the security blazer had gotten suspicious when a woman answered his announcement call who wasn't Soffian's secretary. The Parnassus Towers has a mania about kidnappings—the Red Brigades, the PLO, the JDL, take your pick—so he stuck his nose in.

I had given Jaffee and Company a straight reading (excluding Cassy) on finding the door open and walking in to find Soffian's body. "I was about to call you people," I said for the thirty-eighth time from the couch in Soffian's den, "when the security cat walked in." The apartment was crawling with technical types.

"Twenty minutes! That's how long you were up here, Kelly, twenty minutes! What were you doing, and where's the woman who answered the house phone?"

"Beats me. If there was a woman up here, I didn't bump into her."

"What do you mean *if*?" The security blazer got into the act. "Are you trying to tell me I made the woman's voice up?"

I shrugged, which I can do very effectively. "Maybe you buzzed the wrong apartment. Maybe you just hear voices." I raised my eyes to Jaffee. "What's he doing grilling me anyway? He's a doorman with a gun, not a cop."

That got the blazer going in high gear. "Look, you punk, I put twenty-three years in the Bureau—"

"So go enjoy your pension."

Mr. Ex-FBI flexed his forearm under the blazer sleeve and made a fist. "Look, for two cents I'd—"

"All right," Jaffee said, suppressing a smile, "that will be all for now, Reagan. Thanks for your help."

After Agent Reagan had schlepped out, Jaffee let that suppressed smile

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run amok all over his face. But don't think I've made a fan out of him, folks. Most city cops dislike Bureau types. And the smile didn't last long—Orca was back on the job.

"When's the last time you saw Soffian alive, Kelly?"

"About eighteen months ago at a Grammy Dinner."

"You didn't see him last night?"

"Nope." Already I'm getting information without asking. The ME must have made the death long before I waltzed in, so I could coast.

"Grammy Dinner? That's something to do with records. What have you got to do with records, Kelly?"

Oh-oh, I can see a dorsal fin looming on the horizon.

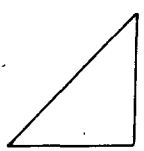
"Nothing, lately. I cut an album several years ago. Soffian was my A and R." From the look on his face, I could see it was explanation time. "The job changes from company to company, but it's like a producer-director in films."

"What was the title of your album?"

"*Symphony for Triangle, Kazoo, and Fool*. What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

"This, Kelly—this!"

He took a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to me. It was another one of those phone memo sheets—with no message that I could see, just a doodle, like a triangle:



That told me something or told me nothing. Then Jaffee told me something, and it certainly wasn't nothing, pal.

"That was found in the dead man's palm, Kelly. People who are stabbed in the back don't necessarily die instantly. Sometimes they have a split-second and an inner drive to name their murderer."

Now it's fake-it time, folks. "You know, Jaffee, you amaze me. First, a musical triangle doesn't look like that. That's a—"

"Isosceles."

"Whatever. A musical triangle has equal sides, and one corner is open."

"A dying man doesn't have time for details."

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"Maybe, but a Lieutenant Detective should. Like, for openers, Soffian's hottest rock group right now is the Euclid Dimension. Get it, Jaffee?"

"We know about the group," Jaffee said matter-of-factly, and shifted gears. "Right now I'm interested in you. Your album wasn't a success, was it?"

"The industry called it a bomb."

"The industry also says that Soffian had screwed it up to a fare-thee-well and your name was Mud."

"It was bad material in the hands of a guy who was just learning the ropes. The promotion was weak, the distribution nonexistent. It was as much my fault as his. You're scamming, Jaffee, just to give me the twitches, and you know it. Do you think I'd wait three years to even a score?"

"Why did you show up here today?"

"I told you already. He called me last week sometime and said he wanted to see me." (That was the weakest link in the chain that could shackle me to a dungeon wall.) "Jaffee, I'm getting tired of the verbal tennis. If you've got a case, book me and I'll get a lawyer. If not, I've got a business to run."

"You can go. Just don't leave town. Oh, yes, Kelly"—he gave me what is known as the center-stage first-act pre-curtain hesitation—"why don't you take the private elevator direct to the garage? It's quicker, and Reagan won't have a chance to work you over."

Very cute. He tosses me a fast-breaking curve about the elevator and expects me to take a cut at it. I let it go by, but didn't wait to see if it was a ball or a strike. Hell, it had to be a ball. If he or Reagan's goons had nabbed Mario and Cassy he wouldn't be wasting his time with curves and chatter.

"Reagan doesn't bother me, Lieutenant." I delivered my exit line and left.

There was a different red blazer at the desk as I passed through the lobby, so I got no hassles from the ex-Fed. I hit the street and started looking for a cab. I said *looking* because in mid-Manhattan at five P.M., finding one is a shade this side of Stanley looking for Livingstone, and rarely as successful.

Walking east acrosstown, I suddenly notice that I have grown a tail. He didn't look or tail like a cop, but he was following me just the same. I used a few uptown and then downtown one-block detours to test him.

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A guy in a white Palm Beach suit isn't difficult to spot. I had had enough of the game around Park and Fifty-Second, so I spun around and walked right into him. "Sorry, bub," I said into his startled face, "you flunk. It's back to the Police Academy for you."

He was young, no more than twenty-two or -three, and a bit on the pudgy side. Our little romp had left him slightly breathless.

"Police! I'm not with the cops, Mr. Kelly. Don't you remember me?"

"Yeah, you were with those security goons when they crashed Soffian's place. If you're not a cop, what are you—a PI?"

"We met a couple of times on the promo-party circuit. Dobie Swaine. The music critic." Talk about padding your role. He writes a pop-music column for the *Sunday Gazette* called "The Stylus."

"So music critics cover murders?"

His chubby face beamed. "A newspaperman is a newspaperman. Talk about lucking in. I showed up at the Towers hoping to talk my way into seeing Soffian for an interview and found all those security guys running for the elevators. One of them said, 'Soffian, Penthouse,' and in the confusion I sneaked up there in another elevator. Of course they tossed me out on my ear, but I heard enough to phone in a scoop. Then I waited around and tailed you since you're a suspect."

"Suspect of what?"

"Well—" He eyed the foot traffic eddying around us. "Can we go someplace and talk? I think I can help."

"My club's a few blocks away. Come on."

By the time we got to my joint, he had spilled everything he knew and then some. To wit: he was tired of being an odd-job reporter on *The Gazette*. He'd gotten stuck with all the second-string assignments, like obits and weather, and even put in a stint on the Hilda's Household Hints column until he moved over to the record schtick. But that wasn't enough for Mr. Dobie Swaine—he wanted to be another Woodward and Bernstein combined. He saw Soffian's murder as his big break because he knew the record business cold. The white suit was part of his "see me" act—only it had been used before, and by better writers.

"If I can solve this case, Chick," he said—note no more Mister—"I can get a front-page byline and a regular assignment."

"Swell—and don't overlook the Pulitzer Prize, the book rights, and the Carson show."

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"I'll settle for a beat assignment off the metro desk. The regular reporters will have all the stuff about the murder scene, but we need something new—a nugget."

"Suddenly it's *we*? Which one am I, Woodward or Bernstein?"

But Mrs. Kelly's kid is no dope. I have here what is known as a patsy. Ten-to-one, Jaffee will hold back the triangle doodle, so that's a nugget for Swaine. It's also a chance to divert any attention away from Cassy and publicly toss it onto the Euclid Dimension, which will muddy the waters very nicely. I saved it until we were in the back-office.

"Wow!" Swaine said when I drew the triangle on a pad for him. "This was found in his hand?"

"Yup. I think it's nothing, but Jaffee wants to marry it. He even has some nutty idea that it has something to do with a record I cut for Soffian when he was small change."

"Oh, yeah, the triangle thing. I was looking at it as a pyramid. See—if you turn it?"

"So?"

"Then it's a pyramid—Egypt, Chick. Mo Malakian, the head of Zumgolly Records. He's called the Camel Driver in the trade."

This was even better than I'd hoped for. I've got another suspect in the mix, on top of the four guys in the Euclid group. That ought to keep Jaffee hopping in circles. Beautiful—the more the merrier. So he shouldn't miss it, I gave Swaine the Euclid bait.

"Wow!" (Some writer he must be—this is his second wow.) "This is dynamite, Chick! Can I use your phone?"

I pushed it over to him.

I guess his metro editor gave him a lecture on libel laws, but said he'd use the doodle bit and let Swaine follow up on the story. He hung up and started walking on air, Pulitzers sprouting everywhere. (He'd probably say "wow" in his acceptance speech.)

"Thanks a million, Chick," he said. "I won't forget it. Man, have I got a lot of details to track down."

"Good tracking. Where do you start?"

"Malakian. There have been rumors that Soffian was going to take his own label, Caramella, out of the Zumgolly organization. Without it, Mo Malakian would be goat meat. All the house star groups were signed by Caramella."

"Sounds like heady finance."

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"Very. Then there's the Euclid Dimension, but I can't see a murder connection there. They're a high-energy act, big platinum, and they've done well with Soffian. Still, they're acid heads. Do you know the group?"

"By rep. Dietrich Barnes used to be their manager. He comes in here once in a while."

"He still is their manager. My money would be on Shem Powers, the drummer in the group. He's a wierdo."

"I thought you just got a lecture on libel, Swaine."

"Hey, this is just between you and me, Chick." He paused at the doorway. "But maybe—no, it's too remote."

"What?"

"The triangle. A love triangle—like two women after the same guy. Soffian's secretary, B. J. Lowell, has been on his string for years, and lately he's been chumming around with Cassy Springwater. That could be an angle."

"But not a 'wow' angle, Dobie boy. Don't get melodramatic."

"Yeah, you're right. Too many suspects spoil the case, huh?"

"Check, pal." But I liked what he gave me. Too many suspects, lots of confusion.

Around ten o'clock that night, I not only had too many suspects, I also had too many detectives.

I was on my way to see Cassy at Annie's place and left the club by the side door, hoping to dodge a possible Jaffee shadow, when he popped out of the doorway across the alley.

"Good evening, Reagan," I said. "We don't put out the garbage until two A.M., but you're free to rummage around when it comes out."

"Sonny, you've got one smart mouth. I thought you'd duck out this way sooner or later. You're no dope, though. The locals have a tail team waiting out on the street—blue Camaro."

"O.K. So what's your angle? I thought you were retired."

"From the Bureau, yes. I want to keep from retiring from Parnassus Towers."

"Job on the hook?"

"It might be. I'm Chief of Security, and someone cracked the system I designed."

"Not me, pal. I used the front door."

"Oh, you're out of it. According to the ME, Soffian was killed sometime

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between eleven last night and one o'clock this morning, when you were at the club. Jaffee's just singeing your hairs."

"Somehow I never doubted my innocence."

"You're out of the murder, but you're still in as an accomplice. You were dumb Irish lucky that the private-elevator power went back on at 2:25, just before you arrived."

"When did it go off?"

"Midnight, or ten after. Want a scenario? I think a woman came home with Soffian around eleven last night. She had a quarrel with him and killed him, say around 12:05. When she tried to get out by the elevator, it wasn't working, so she was trapped and called you for help."

"She calls me at 12:05 and I wait until 2:30 the next afternoon to show up? Some help!"

"I don't know when she called you, but she answered the house phone, Kelly."

"How do you know Soffian came home around eleven o'clock?"

"We have an in-house phone-message service and he queried it at 11:05. He could do it only from the house phone in his apartment—it's part of the security system. The only flaw in the damn thing is that there's no night guard in the garage—the tenants won't allow it. We've got all kinds of international types—sheiks, financiers, a couple of ambassadors, movie people. God knows who goes in and out by the garage at night, but they insisted on the key post system for the doors. And to make matters worse, the doors can be electronically controlled from the apartments—"

I let him ramble on while I sorted some things out in my head. Between 11:00 P.M. and 12:05 A.M. anybody could have gotten in and out again, while Cassy was zonked out of her skull. I decided to put Reagan on some leads. What the hell, I had Dobie Swaine, Jaffee and his army—why not Reagan? "So what do you want from me, Reagan?" I asked.

"The woman's name—the one who answered the house phone."

"I told you, the apartment was empty when I got there, and you just said the private elevator started working again just before I arrived. O.K., so you heard a woman answer. She goes down in the private elevator while I'm coming up. No accomplice—I just found the body, that's all."

"So where did she go? The garage guard didn't see her."

Damned right, I thought. Mario is very good at hiding packages. She was probably in the trunk. Time to give my new recruit an assignment.

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I told him about the triangle—it was old news to him, as was the Euclid Dimension, but the pyramid/Malakian connection got his attention.

"Now *that's* interesting, Kelly. But it still doesn't explain the girl being up there."

"He had a secretary, didn't he? B. J. Something. She could have disguised her voice and ducked down the private elevator. If you check up on it, you'll find she and Soffian were an item. Love breeds hate, etc."

"Who was the guy in the ice-cream suit tailing you? I saw you face him down when he got in the middle of my own tail."

"He's a newspaper kid with big ambitions. Name's Swaine."

"That checks."

"What checks?"

"He somehow followed us up to Soffian's in the confusion and got tossed out. What checks is, now I know what you were doing in those twenty minutes at Soffian's. Calling the papers instead of the cops. You guys will do anything for publicity."

How do you like that? I call Joe Menkler for a Crossdex check, he cross-checks me by siccing a reporter onto me, and they hit it dumb lucky with a murder scene. Some friend. I let it ride though, because it does answer the twenty-minute gap very nicely.

"You sure I'm off Jaffee's meathook, Reagan?"

"Reasonably. The time-of-death angle clears you, and you're not a doper by all reports."

"You've been a busy boy, Reagan. You see a dope angle in this?"

"The record business? Besides"—he gave me a sly smile—"I've got some leads of my own on the drug angle. Maybe you're leveling on the woman not being there when you arrived, maybe not. It could be someone was setting you up."

"Time angle, remember."

"Dopers don't know anything about time. See you, Kelly."

Maybe he was trying to push my buttons, so I didn't overreact in front of him, but I sure did after he cleared the alley.

Any guy who's been divorced three times is a qualified expert at dodging tails and an hour later, after a few twists and turns in several cabs, I was safely in Annie Longo's West Side pad. "She's not here, Chick," Miss Sophia Look-Alike says as I walk in. "I got her to eat some scrambled eggs and when I was in the shower, she must have split. She's one

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screwed-up kid. You want some cannelloni? I made it for Mario, but he's got night fares."

I'll never understand Mario's double life. His wife Maria has the same face, figure, temperament, and taste in cooking—so why the fascination? Personally, I think it's a game with him—but, then, it's his game. She served the cannelloni—delicious. I'd lay twenty-to-one Mario was home in Bethpage eating the same damn thing.

"When Mario walked her in here I thought it was one of *his* girl friends," Annie told me. "Then he said she was your—ah—situation, so I said O.K. But she's a screwy dame and definitely not your type, Chick."

"She needed help, Annie," I explained.

Then, for no good reason, somewhere in the back of my mind I heard Reagan's voice saying, "It could be someone was setting you up." And suddenly the cannelloni tasted terrible.

I took the indigestion back to the club with me to do the early show and got more grief. Guido, my head chef, was not only resigning, he was about to kill Jack McCarthy, my kitchen manager. Another murder I didn't need, so I arbitrated the screaming match while climbing into my tux.

"What's the beef, fellas?"

"That's it, Champ!" Jack Mac shouts. "Beef! I buy the best prime available and this guy uses meat tenderizer on it. On *Omaha prime,* Chick!"

Guido can swear in eight languages, and he used every one of them on Jack Mac. "I say ha-ha to his Omaha, Chick! He uses meat tenderizer before the steaks are delivered!"

"Wait a minute," I said. "What's with the meat tenderizer?"

Jack Mac is waving a piece of paper in his little hand. "Here's the proof, Chick. That stuff you gave me to have that lab in Long Island analyze is meat tenderizer. Read the report. Salt, sugar, tricalcium phosphate, papain—put it all together, it spells tenderizer!"

"O.K. Neutral corners, gentlemen. Jack, the sample I gave you didn't come from the club. I got it someplace else. Now kiss and make up, both of you, and stop jumping to conclusions from now on."

"Champ," Jack Mac said, "is this connected to the problem up at Soffian's?"

"I *thought* it might be, but I guess not," I told him. "I found the stuff

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on a butler's-pantry counter and assumed it was some kind of drug."

I did the ten o'clock show and another at midnight, and finally the three o'clock set—to an audience of thirty-five people. Barry, of course, was home copping zzz's, the bum.

Maybe I'm doing the wrong act. Instead of standup comedy I ought to become a male stripper because the world sure loves to see me undress. I was taking off the tux when there was a knock at the office door and my "Come in" brought in a new voyeur—Dietrich Barnes, the business manager of the Euclid Dimension.

"Oh, sorry, Chick—I didn't know you were dressing."

"Don't be silly. I get my jollies this way. Want to book me into the next Woodstock?"

He didn't smile or grin as I'd expected. Barney Barnes was usually a very easy-going guy. In fact, years before Barry became my agent, I had considered going with Barney but thought better of it. He was too easy on his clients, where Barry Kantrowitz (or, rather, his wife Sylvia) is tough and no-nonsense about careers. Not that all their discipline had helped much, but that's another sad story for which I'll need the Mantovani string section as backup.

Barney looked pale and grim. The only difference between him and a tall cadaver was the twitching of his hands. "Good show, Chick. Topical. Perfect pacing. The bit on cable TV is a masterpiece—gigahertz."

"Thank you, sir, but you don't look like a guy who just busted his gut with mirth."

If there's a word to describe how a grim face gets grimmer, it's not in my dictionary, but his did—grimmest. "Chick, I came to warn you—no, that's wrong—I came to *advise* you that you might be in danger."

"I'm in danger every time I walk on stage, Barney. Why don't you sit down, pal? Want a drink?"

"No, thanks, I'm on Perrier these days."

"That stuff's getting as popular as water," I parried. No smile. I gave up. "What's the problem, Barney?"

"Shaun Powers. I just tucked the group in over at the Schuyler Hotel after spending two hours trying to talk Shaun out of killing you."

"Mercy me!" I did a double. "I thought his name was *Shem* Powers."

"His brother. Shem's on drums, Shaun's lead guitar. It's serious, Chick." More grim. "The cops came into the suite at the Schuyler, sup-

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posedly to question the boys about Soffian's death, and busted Shem on a cocaine rap. Some lieutenant indicated that *you* had implicated the group because of a triangle that Soffian drew. Shaun's a wild kid, Chick. They all are—Shem and Dave and Popper Logan. Normally I can control them, but Shaun's got it into his head that you caused all the trouble, and he's out to get you."

"Barney boy, get a good lawyer. I'll give you a name and number even. The lieutenant's name is Jaffee and he's just stirring up confusion." (Note yours truly, Mr. Chutzpah, who's been doing the same thing.) "Besides, I don't think the cops can search someone for drugs if they got in for another purpose. Call Ted Summers."

"I'm not worried about the bust, Chick. I'm concerned that Shaun will do something rash."

"Could it be that one of them already did something rash up at Soffian's place? O.K., cheap shot, Barney, but what in hell are you doing mixed up with those hopheads anyway? You're an old pro, pal, but this is a different scene. Too much money too fast. Speed, speed, and more speed, and groupies."

The mention of groupies made him go as pale as I figure is humanly possible.

"You're too old for that action, Barney. Wild children on a rampage, busting up hotel rooms, flaunting and taunting. Why the Schuyler, by the way? That's the fleabag of all time."

"Peck's Bad Boy types have been around show business for a long time, Chick. The Keatons and Cohans built whole shows around them. I remember a young Irish kid named Kelly who was doing stuff Lenny shied away from. You were taking shots Mort wouldn't go near. It's the same ball game, just different players. But, in a way, you were different, Chick. You never showed contempt for the audience. These kids, once they make it, have contempt. Be that as it may, I just dropped in to *advise* you. I'll get Shem out on bond and we'll be touring upstate for three weeks. But be careful for a couple of days, will you?"

I told him sure and he started to leave, then turned back to me.

"Maybe back then, if we had gotten together, Chick, it would have been different. Maybe we'd be headlining the Sands, you'd still have Maureen, you—"

I'd had enough of Mantovani's strings for one day, so I cut him off. He *would* mention Maureen. "All you'd have is forty percent of a broken-

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down nightclub. I'll stay clear of the rock-and-roller. Now say good night, Gracie."

He did, thank God. Who needs this kind of scene while he's standing in his underwear?

I wish to hell Don Ameche hadn't met Loretta Young and felt compelled to invent the telephone, because it was the start of a conspiracy to rob me of sleep.

9:00 A.M. Tuesday—Richter scale #11. "Harwoe."

"Chick, did I wake you?"

"Cassy, you're my official wake-up service. Not in any penthouses, I hope?"

"I'm in Lake Placid, on a concert at the Slocum Lodge. I just wanted to thank you."

"You're welcome, country girl. Tell me, baby, did you and your friend have steaks at his place the other night?"

"No, we had sandwiches at the studio. Why?"

"Just curious. How do you feel?"

"Tired and still woozy. Chick"—her voice went soft and scared—"I've been thinking. Maybe I *did* do it. God may have deserted me and the devil took over. The Bible says—"

"Cassy, two questions. Why did you go up to his place? And when did you start feeling funny?"

"He wanted to talk about my signing with him exclusively, not just as my A and R on the Caramella label but the whole thing—business manager, personal manager. He knew I was considering going with Barney Barnes and he was against it. We couldn't talk at the studio because Barney was there with the Euclid Dimension. I don't know when I got sick—it must have been a little after we got there."

The Barney Barnes angle also sounded interesting. I told her to hang in and everything would be all right.

10:05 A.M. Reagan was very excited on the phone, but it was old news to me—the Shaun Powers threat.

"I've heard about it already, Reagan—and his brother's bust."

"There's more to it than that. You know show business and I don't, but isn't it strange that this Euclid group couldn't make immediate bail? I thought these rock sensations were all millionaires."

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"They probably spend it as fast as they make it, just like the rest of us."

"Maybe. Does the name Donna Hemming mean anything to you?"

"No. Should it?"

"It cropped up. I've got some old buddies out at Treasury checking some things. *You're* not much help. I thought you were Mr. Show Biz."

"Not in the record business. But I can put you onto a guy who is." I tossed him Dobie Swaine's number to really confuse things and called the conversation short. Good luck and good riddance.

11:15 A.M. "Mr. Kelly," said an efficient-sounding female voice, "Mr. Mohammed Malakian's office calling."

One of my pet peeves about New York secretaries is this "Mr. So-and-so's office calling" jazz. Not Mr. So-and-so, but his *office*.

"This is Mr. Kelly's home answering," I said.

I didn't get to talk to the camel driver. His minioness just wanted to know if I could be at the Zumgolly office at two that afternoon. I said I'd be there. Maybe Dobie Swaine had something in that pyramid idea.

At ten after two that afternoon, I was sitting opposite two sphinxes—one male and one female. The only thing noteworthy about Mr. Malakian was the beautiful cut of his suit—*real* Savile Row. Otherwise he looked like a short-order cook who always makes well done hamburgers no matter how you order them and then insists it's rare or medium until you give in and eat the damn thing.

B. J. Lowell's clothes could be described only as unfortunate. She looked like a thirty-year-old flower child who has finally mastered the art of sitting in a chair instead of on the floor—sort of crash-pad chic. After she was intro'd as the new president of the Caramella label division, she won the "which is the real sphinx" contest because she said nothing. The camel driver went on like an endless caravan going nowhere.

I finally got sick of it and interrupted. "Malakian, it's very nice that you're sorry we never met before, but why am I here? You couldn't have been involved in the record I made because Caramella was an independent in those days."

"Precisely, Mr. Kelly. Chick, if you will allow." I nodded. "I asked you here because I wanted to make it clear that, with Alec's unfortunate passing, your contract with Caramella is now assigned to Zumgolly. I

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wanted to welcome you to the family and have you and B.J. get acquainted, since she'll be your new A and R."

"She won't have to do much. The album's out of circulation."

"Ah, but since you went to see him, Alec must have had some plans for you. It must have been a terrible experience for you, walking into the murder scene."

Now we were getting to the point. With the exception of Swaine getting the triangle bit into the newspapers, there hadn't been much about the case to publicize except that I had found the body. So the camel driver had turned rug dealer and was willing to haggle for information. Soffian's deal with Zumgolly obviously had a clause that gave the entire ball game to Malakian on his death. (Probably there was a vice-versa thing too, if I knew Soffian.) So Malakian had a motive, and the cops must have paid him a few visits.

Let us also note that the Haight-Ashbury holdover sitting beside him benefited handsomely. (Hey, fans, first too many detectives and now too many suspects—this case is getting as crowded as the uptown IRT at 5:00 P.M. Well, grab a strap and hang on. Another detective has joined the case—me.)

"Oh, it was just your run-of-the-mill murder scene. Quiet as a tomb, body slumped over the desk, letter opener in his back, lots of blood. He must have clung to life for a while because—"

It worked. B.J. was on her sandaled feet, screaming, "Stop it, you ghoul!" She rushed from the room.

Malakian shook his head. "It's unfortunate you were so graphic. B.J. had great affection for Alec." He hesitated. "You said Alec must have clung to life for a while. Is that police theory or your own surmise?"

"Read the newspapers. They found a drawing in his hand—a pyramid."

He gave out a halfhearted laugh. "An isosceles triangle would make a rather odd pyramid, don't you think?"

"A dying man would tend to be in a hurry. You can't expect perfection."

"No matter—" Malakian brushed the whole thing under a tent flap. "B.J. will be all right, I'm sure. I'm surprised you and she haven't met before, both being in the business."

My mouth was saying, "I've never really been in the record business," but my brain was telling me I had another detective on my hands. The papers reported "a woman's voice" on the intercom (Reagan's two cents) and the camel driver wonders if it could have been B.J. So enter another

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detective, only this one was probably looking for something to get the heat off himself.

"But you still *are* in the business," he said. "I listened to your album this morning and I know what the problem was. You were too caustic."

"Some people call it truthful—but what the hell."

"In those days the public wanted entertainment, not truth. *Now*, maybe, they're ready."

He gave me another caravan of words about getting together to see what we could come up with—blah, blah, blah. Nuts. The bubble-gum crowd buys the records these days and nobody except Steve (maybe) sells comedy albums. And Malakian knows it.

The only other person waiting in the hall outside Zumgolly's office for an elevator down was a funny-looking kid in not-too-clean kitchen-worker whites. It made me appreciate how clean my own help is back at the club. The kid was humming away impatiently until he spotted me and went into a squint-eyed study.

"Are you a celeb? Sure, you're a celeb. Don't tell me—I'll get it. Let's see. Movies—sure, movies." He kept snapping his fingers. "Steve—no. Paul—no. Man, this is embarrassing. It's right on the tip of my tongue."

"Chick Kelly," I said to shut him up.

"Sure, Chick Kelly! Trevor Lamont here."

I'm thinking, *Trevor Lamont!* Maybe Trevor, maybe Lamont—but together, never.

"Like the name? I'm using it this week to see how it works. I was King Lamont last week, but that's too much like King Vidor. I'm a movie director, like him. Whaddya think—King or Trevor?"

"Stick with Trevor. More class."

"That's what I think. I mean, 'directed by Morty Finster' is a drag. What's your favorite sandwich?"

"Bombay Polo Club Special," I told him.

"Whazzat? What's in it?"

"Triple decker—chicken, bacon, lamb, lettuce, tomatoes, and chutney mayonnaise."

"Chutney mayo! No, Morty'd never put that on the menu."

"I thought *you* were Morty."

"I mean my Uncle Morty. He owns the sandwich shop downstairs. I'm named for him. He was against me naming sandwiches after the stars like

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they do at the Stage Deli and the Carnegie—but you gotta compete or die. Right now most of our sandwiches are named for rock stars, because we got most of the record companies in this building as accounts. Chutney's out, though. Sorry."

"Those are the breaks." The elevator arrived, but he didn't stop.

"Don't feel bad—a lot of stars don't make the card. Take Cassy Springwater. The singer?" I nodded. "She's a swell lady—but Velveeta on plain white! Balloon white, yet. My uncle almost tossed a thrombo. The best sandwich idea we got is minute steak on rye toast with sliced avocado and Russian—it's terrific—but what would it mean to put the Donna Hemming Special on the menu? People would say, whozzat, right?"

Donna Hemming? Who had mentioned her? Yes, Reagan—on the phone. "Who's Donna Hemming?" I asked him.

"She was a buddy of Miss Lowell's up at Zumgolly. I haven't seen her in months though."

Now that we'd finally hit the main floor, I wanted to talk with Morty-Trevor, damn it, and I hung onto him, but the next fifteen minutes aren't worth reporting unless you're interested in why Uncle Morty won't use chutney mayo. However, I did extract some information on the Hemming woman that might help Reagan. The main points: she was around 23 or 24, the cute "fresh-air type," and not a "Noo Yawker." B. J. Lowell was always scolding her for eating meat, mostly because La Lowell lived on brown rice and seeds and yogurt. (Uncle Morty would have nothing to do with the brown rice and seeds, but the yogurt was O.K.) It wasn't much to pass along to one of my detectives, but if I could keep Reagan busy, why not? Anything to stop him from getting a line on Miss Velveeta on Balloon White.

The Parnassus security office, where I called from a booth across the street from Uncle Morty, said he was on vacation and, after I'd faced down the clerk for his home phone number, Mrs. Reagan told me he was in Connecticut on business. Then I decided to give Swaine the nod. He wasn't at *The Gazette*, so I dug his home number out of the phone book and punched the numbers: 536-9877. Beep, beep, beep. Beep, beep, beep, beep.

It was machine time: "Hello, this is Dobie Swaine. I'm out just now, but if you'll leave your name and number at the sound of the beep, I'll get back to you." Another beep.

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"Kelly," I told the machine. "See what you can find out about a friend of B. J. Lowell named Donna Hemming. She might be a suspect."

Now, since Reagan already had Donna Hemming in his craw and Swaine would after he checked his machine, why be unfair? Jaffee should be in on the deal as well. On the other hand, why spend a dime on him? Out on the street, it took me only four minutes to spot the blue Camaro with my police tail on vigil.

"Hi, guys," I said to two peevish faces. "Do me a favor. Radio Jaffee and tell him that a girl named Donna Hemming might be mixed up in the Soffian killing. Over and out."

Left Seat looked at Right Seat and then back at me. "Why don't you get in and we'll take you downtown so you can tell him yourself?"

"No, thanks—I never go south of Forty-second Street this time of year. I'm going back to my club, so take your time. Have a sandwich. There's a swell shop over there. Try the chutney mayo. It's Uncle Morty's specialty."

Left Seat's peevy puss turned into a sneer, but he was reaching for the dashboard handmike as I walked away.

All the rest of the day, I half expected Jaffee to come barging into the joint emitting emotional explosions over the Hemming bit, but he was a no-show—at least until 11:00 P.M., and then I had to invite him.

I had just come off the ten o'clock set (mostly a polyester crowd, so I switched to the mother-in-law schtick) and was greeted by Manuel, one of my kitchen helpers, who had a look of doom on his face.

"What's the matter, Manuel?" I asked him, wondering if Jack Mac and Guido were at it again.

"You better come with me, Mr. Chick. In the back alley. I don't tell nobody. I wait for you."

I followed him through the kitchen to the alley door and out into the darkness. The light over the garbage area must have blown out, and if that was Manuel's problem I vowed to strangle him.

"Over here, Mr. Chick," he said, turning on a flashlight.

The body lay on its back, and I could see the bloody shirt-front gleaming in the light. The trouser pockets were turned out.

"Rat-basset muggers," Manuel said under his breath. I took the torch from him, bent down, and tried to get a pulse. Reagan's skin was still warm, but I couldn't get a beat.

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"Call 911, Manuel. No, have Jack Mac do it. Tell him ambulance *and* cops. Murder."

I don't claim to be a doctor, but I know enough to realize that a pulse can be so weak nobody can get it. I reached over and lifted each eyelid. The corneas were cloudy.

Within five minutes an ambulance arrived along with what seemed like a hundred cops, followed ten minutes later by Jaffee. I left them to their work and went back to the kitchen. I needed a drink before I started playing a Thousand and Twenty Questions. Ever-faithful Jack Mac had a VTNL waiting for me at the salad-assembly table.

"Hey, Champ," he says to me, "you've got some blood on your cuff. Take the shirt off and I'll get it out before it sets."

"To hell with it. You can't get bloodstains out completely anyway."

"I can," the little guy says. "You know that tenderizer Guido says he never uses? I read it's great for getting out bloodstains."

Before I know it I'm doing another strip-tease.

The ensuing session with Jaffee was a beaut. I didn't realize he knew so many dirty words. I finally turned the tables with one question. "Where were the bird dogs in the blue Camaro? Come on, Jaffee—you've had me tailed for two days. If they had the club under surveillance, they must have seen the killer and Reagan go into the alley and only one of them walk out."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Who's Donna Hemming?"

Poor Jaffee. I mention the tail and he mentions Hemming. Bad slip, Bullethead. Of course, when I wised off at the boys in the Camaro, Jaffee called them off since I was hip to them. But I can't gloat too much because if I hadn't blown their cover they would have been on duty and Reagan might still be alive—or at least his killer may have been spotted.

"Who's Donna Hemming?" Jaffee repeated, with added irritation.

"Reagan asked me if I knew her. He was doing some spadework himself, you know. To protect his job."

"No, goddammit, I didn't. I do know he entered and left this alley the other night, but I figured he was just looking to beat hell out of you for smart-mouthing him up at Soffian's. So he was doing spadework! Now I don't feel so bad. The stupid amateur."

"You said he was ex-FBI, didn't you?"

"Yeah, an electrical draftsman who worked his way up to internal-

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security specialist. He wasn't a field agent. What did he say about the Hemming woman?"

"Like I said—he asked if I knew her, that's all. I found out this afternoon she was a buddy of Soffian's secretary, but that's only the word of a sandwich-shop jockey. His name this week is Trevor Lamont, but if you press him he answers to Morty—the nephew, not the uncle. That's it, Lieutenant; the whole bag of beans. I don't know what Reagan was doing in the alley tonight. He was supposed to be in Connecticut, according to his wife."

"You two were pretty damned chummy, weren't you? Don't give me that smug look, Kelly. The only person who could corroborate your story is dead out there. I'll give you another version. Maybe Reagan had something on *you*. Maybe he found out who you're shielding, and you cut him open and faked a mugging. O.K., so you're not that stupid. But you know more than you're telling. I could take you in and put the heat on you for a couple of days, just for the hell of it. Did Reagan tell you anything else?"

"Only that the time sequence lets me out of the Soffian death and the elevators going on again just before I walked in gave whoever answered the house phone a chance to get out. So take me in and give me heat. I can use the publicity. But I don't think you can." While I had his attention, I pulled out all the stops. "The thing that really bugs me is that you have enough suspects and motives to fill a cattle car, yet you're wasting your time harassing me. Did your bird dogs tell you I was at Zumgolly Records today before I blew their cover? Did they tell you that Dietrich Barnes, the manager of the Euclid Dimension, was there the other night? Hell, tick them off—Mo Malakian, B. J. Lowell, Barnes, any one of the Euclids, and don't forget the elusive Donna Hemming. Jaffee, your problem is that you've got too many suspects and I ain't—repeat, *ain't*—one of them. Either for murder *or* abetting. Now good night, Lieutenant. I've got a midnight show to do."

He stormed out, leaving me with an elated feeling. I love to see him squirm—really love it.

Now I'm happy that Don Ameche met Loretta Young and invented the telephone, because I can, once and for all, convince myself Cassy is definitely in the clear. So I punch in—making a mental note to ask Jack Mac if it's costing more money to go modern—and eventually get the backstage phone at the Slocum Lodge in Lake Placid.

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"Miss Springwater's just coming off the stage," a guy announced. "Hold on, I'll get her."

"Chick!" she said when she got on, "is anything wrong?"

"Everything is right. Roses. I just wanted to tell you God didn't desert you, Cassy. You didn't kill Soffian. Whoever did has struck again. So say your prayers and sleep tight."

Of course, that was a big mistake because now I had to go through the whole thing about Reagan, but it was worth it because she was giving me the glow voice before I was through. She promised to pray for Reagan's soul, which was touching even if she didn't even know the guy. "And, Chick," she said before she hung up, "I'm going to pray for you."

"Don't overload the heavenly circuits, Cassy."

"No, I mean it. I was thinking about why I called you that day. You're a Samaritan, Chick. I mean a real one, like in the Bible. You're a good man."

"Swell, Cassy. Look, you've got another show to do and so do I. Goodbye now."

I clicked off with visions of my three ex-wives busting a gut over the St. Chick routine.

But with Cassy in the clear and well shielded, I felt good. I breezed through the midnight and two o'clock shows (the after-dinner and late-night crowd mean and vicious the way I like 'em), and even promised Barry I'd tummel the lunch crowd at noon, just as any Good Samaritan would. But along the way, I had to do something for Reagan. The Samaritan might not be able to bind up his mortal wounds, but I could have a try at finding out who killed him.

At ten o'clock the next morning I started in on it as I sat in the cozy Queens living room of Rose Reagan. The new widow was a touch overweight, but when she was younger people probably called her pert.

"Yes, the police asked me about a Donna Hemming. I told them I never heard of her." Her eyes lowered. "My husband didn't play around, Mr. Kelly."

"I'm sure he didn't, Mrs. Reagan. Her name is somehow connected with the Soffian murder."

"So that's it." She suddenly changed from grief to anger. "The damn fool, the poor damn fool. Forgive me, Mr. Kelly"—she got a grip on herself—"he was like a child, always trying to impress people that he

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worked for the FBI. Only he always made it sound like he was Elliot Ness or someone."

"But he was Chief of Security at a pretty important place."

"Security? He got the job because he understood all the electronics they have at Parnassus Towers. Most of the squad there are ex-cops who couldn't read a schematic if their lives depended on it. Do you know what one of his proudest possessions was? A gun permit. He was like a little boy playing a game."

"It happens to a lot of older men, Mrs. Reagan, in a lot of crazy ways."

"Like Don Quixote? You may be right." She gave out a deep sigh, but it was difficult to tell whether it expressed remorse, disgust, or simple exhaustion.

"He mentioned a friend in the Treasury Department when we talked on the phone yesterday morning."

"Maybe it was Bill Samson. He's with Treasury's criminal counsel's office. His number's in my husband's phone book." She motioned to the desk with her hand.

I walked over to the desk—actually a large drawing board piled high with circuitry schematics—and as I leaned over to pick up the little black phone book, I got one hell of a brain wave.

Around five o'clock that afternoon, I was in the office of T. Clifford Laughton, an Assistant DA—of which there are over a hundred in Manhattan. Which doesn't make him chopped liver. T. Clifford Laughton is the tiger of the lot. Most ADAs have dreams of becoming Governor. Laughton is different—he acts as if he *is* Governor. His voice is stentorian bronze, which is complemented by his prematurely silver temples and gold-rimmed country-lawyer glasses—you could trade him in on the metals exchange for a swift profit once you melted him down.

He motioned me to a chair opposite his desk and started riffling through a batch of file folders. "Kelly, Kelly . . . Kelly," he said with a sigh like the bass treble of the Mormon Tabernacle organ. "Ah, yes." He pulled out one of the files and opened it. "Charles Xavier Kelly. My, my, we've seen a great deal of you over the years."

O.K., enough of his act. "No need to roll out my credits, Laughton. I know them too, and there are no convictions."

The eyes squinted behind the tinted glasses. "Ah, but there will be. Abetting a homicide, giving false information to the police, suspicion of

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a second murder, conspiracy to suppress evidence—"

"That's a shopping list, not a charge sheet," I said, getting to my feet. "So I think I'll leave, unless you have something more to charge me with than hot air."

The tiger of the courtroom purred and pressed a desk buzzer. The door opened and a police matron ushered in Cassy Springwater, looking wrung out. Dope that I am, I should have figured Jaffee would tap my phone when he pulled the tail off.

"Laughton, you're not dumb enough to think you can get a phone tap into court."

More purring. "I don't need to. She admits she may have killed Soffian. Now how about it, Kelly? You've been shielding her all along and chances are you killed Reagan when he tried to shake you down. But I'll tell you what I can do. You can plea the Reagan killing down to second-degree and—"

"I'll go you one better, bub. I'll solve your case for you. I was going to do it anyway, just to square Reagan's death, but now I'm mad, so I want some glory. Don't give me that 'he's faking' look, Laughton, because I'm not. I've spent the last twelve hours tracking down the same clues Jaffee had, only I came up with something more than a confused girl and a phone tap. You can have it, but it's going to cost you—unless you play it my way."

"He's showboating." This from Jaffee, who was standing in the anteroom doorway. "You can't talk your way out of this one, funny man."

"Facts talk, Jaffee, and here's a fact. Who does the triangle point to?"

"That's a question, Kelly."

"It's a question to you, but an answer to me. One you don't have. O.K., book me, and I'll tell the judge and a jury—and the press. How about it, Laughton? You're big on making deals, so I'll let you guys cop this investigation down to second-class stupidity instead of first-degree dumbness. Jump ball—want to play?"

Laughton put a sardonic curl in his lip—half smile or contempt, take your pick.

"Who does the triangle point to, Kelly?"

"For the moment, Humpty Dumpty: What did your people dig up on Donna Hemming?"

The ADA motioned to the matron to take Cassy out, adjusted his glasses, and cleared his cavernous throat. "I like my cases uncomplicated,

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Kelly, straight-line logic. Juries don't like confusion, and introducing Donna Hemming's death—"

"She's dead!"

"Last December. She jumped or walked out of a hotel-room window in Bridgeport, Connecticut. She was a rock groupie, a crazy kid on junk. She went off her head after taking LSD. Introducing her name into this case only confuses things."

"Maybe it clears up some things. Who was she supposedly grouping with, the Euclids?"

He nodded his head. "Admittedly, it looks suspicious. One of them—this Shem, the one we have locked up—is definitely homicidal. But it has nothing to do with Soffian's death. If you're looking for a blackmail angle, forget it. Samson over at Treasury called us after Reagan's murder and he phoned again today to tell us you were nosing around. The Euclids made $850,000 last year and they live like paupers so it smells like blackmail, but—" he shrugged "—Soffian wasn't even in the country when the girl died, so if you're thinking blackmail he couldn't have any incriminating evidence to hold over their heads. Then you have to take into account that whoever killed Soffian probably also killed Reagan, and we had Shem in jail and the others in the group under observation when Reagan got it.

"So you see, Kelly, if one of them did kill Donna Hemming, it's a Bridgeport matter. Whereas if I confine Soffian's death to the single murder it's a simple case. If Miss Springwater pleads manslaughter, she can be out of prison in eighteen months. Reagan's death is another matter, of course, and that's why you're here, Kelly."

"How about the triangle Soffian drew?"

"I've discounted that from the beginning. Last-gasp clues pointing to the killer make for great mystery stories, but they're useless in a courtroom. That triangle can be interpreted in a thousand different ways and juries have to be given hard evidence. Have you any hard evidence, Mr. Kelly?"

"Yeah, I have," I told him. "Hard as a rock. Tell you what I'm going to do—"

It was one grumpy bunch of people who assembled in the DA's main conference room at ten that night. Mo Malakian was more than grumpy, he was irate. Barney Barnes kept a furtive eye on the four jumpy Euclids.

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Cassy Springwater looked confused. B. J. Lowell was either bored or spaced out on brown rice. And, oh yes, there was one other emotion floating around the room. That was the 199-percent-pure hatred from a smoldering Lieutenant Jaffee. Part of my deal with Laughton was that Bullethead was out of it as far as explorations were concerned. And Jaffee really hit the roof when I insisted on having Dobie Swaine invited in, but what the hell. He could use the scoop and I love publicity. Believe me, folks, I was blissed out on revenge.

Laughton gave a preliminary intro about my having something of interest to say, which went over like a dose of pellagra, but I've faced tougher audiences. Try playing Big Sandy, Montana, sometime, pal.

"Isn't this a bit unorthodox, Mr. Laughton?" Malakian asked. "Why should we have to sit here and listen to him?"

"Legally, you don't, Mr. Malakian," Laughton said, hitting his bass treble, "but you're all suspects in the death of Alex Soffian. None of you has a verifiable abili for the time of his death. There is also the possibility that the murder of Philip Reagan is connected to the case. It would seem to me that you all—if you are innocent—would welcome hearing what Mr. Kelly has to say."

"For God's sake, let's get on with it." B. J. Lowell didn't try to hide her disgust.

"Good," Laughton said, and nodded to me. "Mr. Kelly?"

Some intro. But I'm on in one and moving the material. Curtain going up, with props yet. "Ladies and gentlemen, you'll note the flip-chart here. Now Mr. Laughton indicated that we are dealing with two murders, but actually—" I flipped the blank topsheet to show a list:

Alec Soffian
Phil Reagan
Donna Hemming

What an opening! Dynamite! The reactions were varied. B.J. covered her face with her hands. The Euclids and Barney Barnes shot looks at each other. Malakian played stupid and Cassy—well, Cassy just looked like Cassy. Finally, I got a verbal response.

"Why are you bringing that poor child into this?" B.J. asked, her voice cracking, her eyes showing tears.

"Because she's central to the whole shebang, Miss Lowell. Mr. Laugh-

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ton has called her a groupie, mostly because he knows from zip about the music business."

"Donna a groupie? That's absurd!"

"Of course it is. Groupies are promiscuous outsiders, teenyboppers looking for a touch of fame by association. Donna was an insider."

"She was my assistant."

"I think she was more than that, Big Sister. Hey, don't give me the dagger eyes. Your sex life is *your* business!"

"Wait a minute," Malakian said angrily. "Miss Lowell doesn't have to take this abuse—"

"Kelly," Laughton warned sternly, "stick to the point."

"O.K., let's shelve Donna Hemming for the moment and look at Alec Soffian. Why was he killed? Did B. J. Lowell want his job, or was it Malakian, to get control of his stock? Could be, but I don't think so. Soffian was killed for the same reason Reagan was—for playing detective and being too successful at it."

"I thought you were shelving the Hemming girl," Jaffee snapped sarcastically.

I ignored him.

"I think Soffian got curious about where the Euclids' money was going, but Barney Barnes wasn't talking."

"I didn't kill Alec, Chick," Barney said with a whipped dog look on his face. "He was my friend."

"Barney, you've got some twisted sense of friendship. You've been paying off to protect one of these punks from a murder rap, but when your 'friend' Alec got close to the truth and was murdered you sat by and dummied up. Some friend, Barney boy."

"It seems to me, Kelly," Jaffee scoffed, "that you've eliminated everyone here except Miss Springwater and yourself."

"Like hell I have. We have one prime suspect left, haven't we, Laughton?"

The ADA got up from his chair and walked over to Dobie Swaine. "Mr. Swaine," he intoned, "I arrest you for the murder of Alec Soffian and suspicion of homicide in the death of Philip Reagan. Give him the Miranda, Jaffee."

The room was full of confused faces, but none more so than Jaffee's. Dobie Swaine's chubby puss took first prize for innocent disbelief.

"*Me?* Come on, Mr. Laughton, I know Chick's a comedian, but you're

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a law officer and I assume you don't believe in fairy tales. I haven't heard one shred of tangible evidence offered against anyone in this room, and certainly not against me."

"You can tell him, Kelly, since you did the work."

"Delighted. You really had me snowed, Swaine, with all that reporter-with-stars-in-your-eyes jazz. Until I reflected on how you were on the scene from the very beginning."

"Certainly. I went up to Soffian's apartment with the security people," he said.

"Yeah, that's what everyone thought, including Regan. He thought I called your paper during the twenty minutes I spent in the apartment, looking for publicity. I didn't, but *I* figured I sicced you on myself when I called Menkler for a Crossdex check on Soffian's phone number. Shame on Reagan, shame on me. Menkler didn't send you.

"When I said you were there from the beginning, I mean from the real start. You were in Soffian's apartment the night he died because you killed him to protect your blackmail scheme."

"Oh," he said mockingly, "I'm a killer and a blackmailer too. Do you have a witness to this scenario, or possibly some evidence?"

"There was a witness, Swaine, only you made sure she'd be a patsy. A kid named Morty from the sandwich shop downstairs in the Zumgolly office building has given a deposition that someone called in an order including Cassy's usual Velveeta on white at ten-thirty on the night of the murder, and you took the box from him in the lobby, saying you were going up there. You just delivered them to the night guard at Zumgolly, but first you doctored Cassy's sandwich with LSD, knowing it would start working in half an hour to forty-five minutes. The scenario reads that either you set up a meeting with Soffian that night and he let you in with the electronic garage-door gizmo or you sneaked in in Soffian's car trunk. One way or the other, you got in knowing Cassy would be on her trip, killed Soffian, and left her to take the fall."

Jaffee was paying close attention, as were they all. "That's where you hit snag one. The elevators were out and you were trapped. It must have been one hell of a night. There you were—a dead man, a zombie, and a ghoul. I'll bet you punched that elevator button every ten seconds. Then I showed up, and you had to take a chance, so you sneaked down the fire stairs and hit it dumb lucky with the confusion in the lobby. If you started out the door you'd have been stopped, so you used the old

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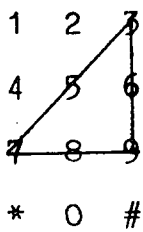
gate-crasher gag and went up after Reagan's squad and they tossed you out."

"The only 'evidence' you've mentioned is some kid's statement that I delivered some sandwiches. That's hardly a murder indictment, Kelly."

"O.K., here's some hard evidence. Soffian's triangle pointed to you. We all make the mistake of seeing people as they are, not what they were. Soffian was an electronics engineer before he got into records. Electronics people, including Soffian *and* Reagan, think in terms of schematics, and that's what the triangle was—a schematic." I flipped the chart to the next page. "It was a diagram of a push-button phone with the triangle superimposed.



"Soffian was telling us who his killer was by giving us a shorthand circuit version of his phone number—*your* number, Swaine. Reagan eventually figured it out too."

Swaine had a sneer on his face. "I'm not an electronics engineer, but I'm sure hundreds of phone numbers can make that pattern. True, one of them is mine, but I'd hardly call that evidence. Do you, Mr. Laughton?"

"I'm on record that it's tenuous. But let Mr. Kelly finish, please."

"Maybe Laughton thinks it's tenuous," I said, "but Ma Bell ran those seven numbers through their computer, and of all the combinations only your phone number is that of anyone connected with this case. Then there's the meat tenderizer.

"The night Phil Reagan died, I got some of his blood on my shirtsleeve, and my kitchen manager got it out with meat tenderizer, which breaks down animal fibers. He got the tip, I found out today, from the Hilda's Household Hints column you wrote two years ago. You used that gimmick to get Soffian's blood off your spiffy white suit that night in his butler's pantry. Only you didn't get it all off, bub—because Laughton's guys got a warrant to search your place, found the suit, and analyzed the stain. The blood type is Soffian's."

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Dobie Swaine got to his feet, shaking his head. "This is laughable, Mr. Laughton! Phone schematics—household hints—blood types—"

"Better sit down, Mr. Swaine," the ADA said. "There's more." He motioned to an aide, who flipped a switch on a tape recorder.

"Hello, this is Dobie Swaine," the voice said. "I'm out just now, but if you'll leave your name and number at the sound of the beep, I'll get back to you." *Beep!* "This is Reagan. You know, from the Parnassus Towers case. I think we should get together as soon as possible. The number is—"

"That message is still on the machine because I never got it," Swaine said, still calm. "And you can never prove I did."

I looked over at Dietrich Barnes. "How about it, Barney? He's right. He can walk out of here with two murders on his hands for lack of enough proof. Will you let him?"

The agent looked back at me for a long sad second, letting it all churn up in him. Then he let it out, his face the same grim mask it had been in my office the night before last. "He did it. I told him Soffian was getting suspicious. He knew Swaine was covering the boys' concert in Bridgeport and he was questioning my constant need for advances—"

"Shut up, Barney." Shem was on his feet, wild-eyed with anger. "They've got *nothing!*"

"How about it, Barney?" I said. "Which one killed Donna Hemming? Shem?"

"Barney!"

"Chick, it wasn't the boys—it was me. I've lived with it long enough and I'm sick of it, of the group's loyalty and of Dobie Swaine. I'll give you a statement, Mr. Laughton."

"You goddamn fool!" Swaine shouted. "That's why they staged this whole thing—to play upon your guilt!"

The cab turned out of Leonard Street and headed north on Centre. As we passed the old city prison, Cassy turned her head to look at it.

"I'd be in there if it weren't for you, Chick."

"No, the Tombs is closed. Snap out of it, Cassy. It's over."

"Not for me. It'll never be over for me, Chick. All the time you were explaining, I was confused. B.J. thinking Donna killed herself over their odd relationship. And Barney—poor Barney—killing Donna because he couldn't have her."

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"I just explained the mechanics, Cassy. I don't understand all the nooks and crannies either. Maybe the guy who said rock is like wandering around in someone else's hell was right. All I know is I got you out and squared Reagan—though I have a hunch the bum was out to tap Swaine's action."

"You know, Chick, I think I'll go back to Country and Western now. I think I can give meaning to lyrics about deceit and pain and betrayal. What do you think, Chick? Have I suffered enough?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Are you hungry?"

"A little."

"How about a Velveeta on white?"

"No, Chick, I've changed. Maybe I'll have olive loaf on whole wheat."

Hey—when you suffer it shows, folks.

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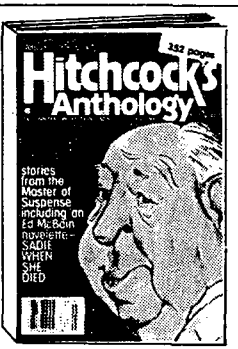
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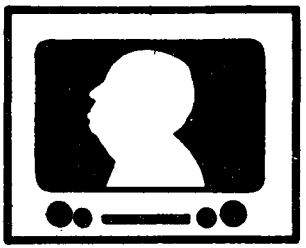

CRIME ON SCREEN

by Peter Christian

Chomping on a cigar, his face creased in a friendly leer, portly William Castle was in his way as devoted to the mystery as was Alfred Hitchcock, for both director-producers devoted with few exceptions their entire careers to crime on screen. Castle was actually a sort of road-company, carnival version of Hitch—with nowhere near the Master's sensitivity nor genius nor output, but nonetheless an energetic creator of thrillers that pleased, thrillers in which he often appeared briefly or introduced (sitting in a director's chair carefully labeled with his name), a life unashamedly devoted to the mystery. He was born, he often remarked, to be the same age as Hollywood's "boy wonder," his friend Orson Welles, and died three years ago. His screen work, a career of inexpensive film *noirs* and complicated little murder shockers, is still remembered: potent, heady drafts of beer if compared to Hitchcockian champagne, but refreshing all the same.

The art of scaring people interested Castle early, as a youngster growing up in New York. The first play his father took him to was DeWolf Hopper in *The Monster*. As a teenager he sat through every performance of *Dracula* with Bela Lugosi for a week, managed to meet and befriend the actor, and toured with a road company of the show as assistant stage manager. In his mid-twenties, in 1939, he managed to fast-talk his way into leasing a Connecticut theater (from Orson Welles!) and exploited the anti-Hitler sympathies of his German leading lady by making it appear the theater was under siege by Bund groups. On opening night the state militia was there to protect an overflow audience. Such initiative could not be neglected long by Hollywood.

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That very year he was on his way to the movie capital; soon he was working for the powerful Harry Cohn of Columbia Pictures, at that time one of the smaller studios. The first film he was allowed to direct, *Chance of a Lifetime*, was a drab Boston Blackie prison story. Then he was handed *The Whistler*, drawn from a popular radio anthology series of its day. "The Whistler" himself was an anonymous man-in-black figure, first heard whistling a chilling little tune, who then would begin bizarre stories of people trapped by fate. The film evolved into a series of movies that showed the narrator only as a menacing figure flitting behind the credits (we hear his voice through the rest of the film); the only other continuity was star Richard Dix, who played a succession of hapless heroes generally doomed at the finale. The atmosphere was grim; Cornell Woolrich wrote several of the stories adapted for the series. Castle also worked on some of Columbia's Crime Doctor and Lone Wolf mystery programmers.

After working with Orson Welles on *Lady from Shanghai* ("A box-office failure. Today it is considered a masterpiece") and doing melodramas at Universal, Castle decided in 1958 to strike out on his own producing thrillers. He had seen the lines forming at theaters showing the European import, *Diabolique*, and sought an American property in a similar vein. When he read *The Marble Forest* by "Theo Durant"—actually a collaborative novel written by thirteen members of the Northern California chapter of the Mystery Writers of America—he knew he had found it. The film, about a small-town doctor frantically searching for his small daughter who may have been buried alive in a cemetery by an unknown madman, was retitled *Macabre*, and for it Castle devised an ingenious promotion stunt. His voice is heard over a clock before the film begins: "Ladies and Gentlemen, when the clock reaches sixty seconds, you will be insured by Lloyds of London for one thousand dollars against death by fright . . . "

No one collected. But many were happily frightened. Castle had found his niche: "I'm going to scare the pants off America."

His next film was also memorable. *The House on Haunted Hill*, in which scheming millionaire Vincent Price invites several strangers to spend a night with him and his wife at a reportedly haunted murder site, has its share of shock effects—including a skeleton which floated through every theater showing the film—but was a solidly grounded mystery. *The Tingler* (1959), his next film, was all scare: a deaf-mute running a silent-movie theater (Judith Evelyn) is frightened to death because she cannot

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scream—and in the end the *real* audience watching the film, you and I, must scream in unison (*"The Tingler is loose,"* we hear Castle's voice on the soundtrack) to avoid the same fate!

The following year Castle constructed his masterpiece. Inspired somewhat by *Psycho, Homicidal* had one of the most arresting openings in mystery moviedom. A striking blonde woman checks into a downtown hotel and offers an obviously interested young bellhop a hundred dollars to marry her in front of a justice of the peace. They go by cab to the official's home, where the mildly lecherous judge—he has never seen the woman before and eyes her appreciatively—begins the ceremony. Without warning, the girl pulls out a huge knife, stabs him to death, and disappears into the night. Thus starts a psychological thriller which explores the girl's eccentric family, where things definitely are not what they seem, and where just before the climax a confident Castle stops the film for a "fright break"—we hear his voice explaining it is a pause "to allow anyone to leave this theater who is too frightened to see the end of the picture and get your full admission refunded." Few did. A compelling mystery, *Homicidal* was chosen by *Time* magazine as one of the ten best films of the year. Even though it had a debt to *Psycho, Time* felt "it surpasses its model in structure, suspense, and sheer nervous drive." While this may be an overenthusiastic reaction, *Homicidal* is deep and packs a wallop.

Castle in the next years filmed the gothic *Mr. Sardonicus* and an unfortunate remake of *The Old Dark House*. Then he teamed with Robert Bloch for the Joan Crawford vehicle, *Straight-Jacket*—a superb little chiller about a small-town axe murderess with a twist ending so surprising that to talk further would spoil it. Like Bloch, Castle had only good things to say about Crawford's professionalism and heart.

Other films followed, including a comic adaptation of a Donald E. Westlake caper novel and another chance at a Robert Bloch screenplay, the labyrinthine *Night Walker*, which starts as a nightmare and ends as a murder plot. In *I Saw What You Did* two teenagers happily placing crank phonecalls to strangers ("I saw what you did, I know who you are—") have the misfortune of connecting with a man who has just murdered his wife; the results echo Cornell Woolrich. But, mainly because of television, the day of the budget thriller was at an end. Castle, to survive, needed to make a "big" picture. Then an agent left him the galley proofs of a new Ira Levin novel about a pregnant girl in New York

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City who slowly becomes aware that a coven of witches has designs on her unborn child. Castle's 1968 film version of *Rosemary's Baby* was not only big and successful, it was sensitive and moving, richly textured and true to its source.

Paramount, the studio with whom he was partnered in the venture, convinced Castle that he should only produce the film; the direction should be left to the young Polish artist, Roman Polanski, who with *Repulsion* and *Knife in the Water* had shown he could handle dark atmosphere. Castle balked at first, but Polanski won him over by agreeing that the book was so good it needed to be translated faithfully to the screen, without much change, and without camera trickery ("Actors tell story . . . like peeping through keyhole of life"). For the main actor, upon whom the entire drama rests, the fragile, vulnerable Mia Farrow was chosen—a frightened-dove performance which was perfect. As to the title role, so effective is the cumulative thrust of the film that many people swear one sees that baby at the climax ("He chose *you* out of all the world, Rosemary. Out of all the women in the whole world, He chose *you*"), but this is not so.

Castle could not duplicate the success of *Rosemary's Baby*. His next venture, an ingenious plot about one man taking another's identity, in which mime Marcel Marceau was to portray both a deaf-mute puppeteer and his eccentric elderly employer and was to speak for the first time on screen, was a failure. (The film was called *Shanks*, and disappeared quickly.) A disaster epic based on *The Hephaestus Plague* did not fare better.

Then, suddenly, Castle died—surely without accomplishing all the mystery melodrama of which he was so fond, surely not through scaring the pants off audiences. Many of his films, "B" though they were, will be remembered—a surprisingly cheerful niche in America's *noir* tradition. Certainly Castle himself—leering from the screen at the start of many of his films, given to mock warnings and the thrill of thrilling—will be remembered as well, the showman who thought he was a Hitchcock and was a measure of both. *"Ladies and gentlemen, Lloyds of London sincerely hopes none of you will collect, but just in case, isn't it comforting to know that your loved ones are protected? You are now insured against death by fright . . . "*

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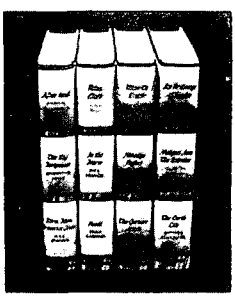

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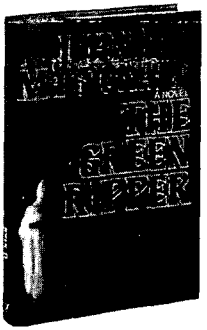

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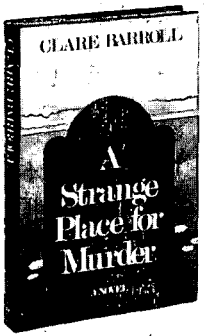

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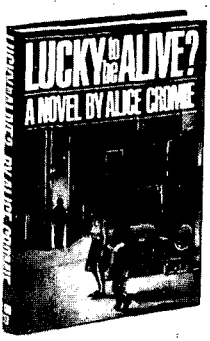

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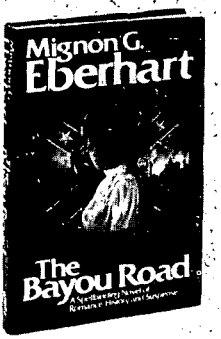

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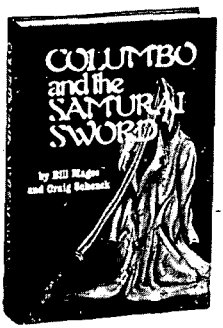

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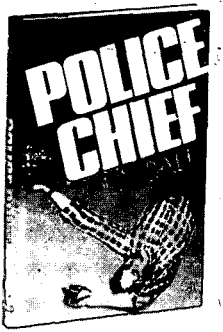

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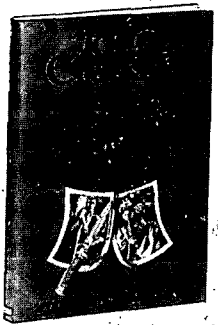

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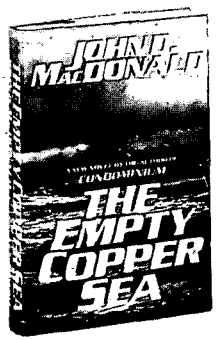

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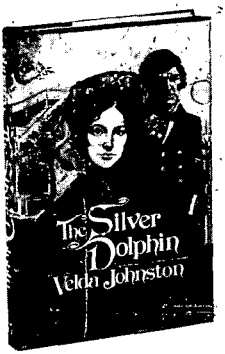

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